

Shift Your Mind

Brian Levenson

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SHIFT YOUR MIND



9 MENTAL SHIFTS TO THRIVE IN
PREPARATION AND PERFORMANCE

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First Edition

To Robin, Braden, and Marin, who help me thrive.
To my incredible support system, who help me prepare and perform.
To those lifelong learners, who are still on the path to greatness.

The Essential Shift between Preparation
and Performance

Shift 1 Humble and Arrogant

Shift 2 Work and Play

Shift 3 Perfectionistic and Adaptable

Shift 4 Analysis and Instinct

Shift 5 Experimenting and Trusting Process

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About the Author

The Essential Shift Between Preparation and Performance

Jon was a well-put-together freshman baseball player at a local community college, where he was a backup shortstop. When we had first met, in January 2013, his obvious boyish enthusiasm and confidence made me excited to work with him. As a mental performance coach, I look for two important characteristics in clients—drive and a desire to learn—and Jon checked both boxes. He would listen attentively and scribble notes in his notepad, which he brought to every meeting, and he would email me after every meeting with a recap of what we discussed. Jon also had his heart and mind set on playing pro ball. He had led his high school team in home runs and received interest from Division I schools before deciding community college was his best option.

There was no denying that Jon had big dreams, and happily, his work ethic matched them. He would work out at the gym for two hours a day, and staying after practice to get in extra reps was normal for him. He had even overcome a form of dyslexia (which we discovered during our work together) to get a 3.5 GPA while in high school. He had a simple formula that had worked for him for years: work exceptionally hard and get results.

Yet it was clear within the first month of working with Jon that his hard work was not unlocking success during his first season at college. I had him fill out an assessment that many Major League Baseball (MLB) teams use to better understand the mindset of their players. Jon scored in the ninety-ninth percentile for reduced flexibility, orientation to rules and risks, self-criticism, and anxiety. It was clear that these issues were getting in the way of his performance. When I first chatted with Jon's dad, he offered up the idea that Jon lacked "confidence." I had heard that from many clients (and parents of clients) before, so it didn't take me by surprise.

When I first met Jon, I didn't think he lacked confidence. How I thought about confidence had shifted a bit about a year earlier, however, when I read an interview with Tom Coughlin, the head coach of the New York Giants.

The Giants had just improbably won the 2012 Super Bowl, defeating the New England Patriots, who were considered the favorite. In the week leading up to the game, Coughlin explained to the media that all season long, he had told his guys to be “humble enough to prepare, confident enough to perform.”¹ It was such a simple quote, but it made a big impression on me. It made so much sense to think that our mindset in *preparation* should be different from our mindset in *performance*.

As I thought more about Jon, I realized that he was certainly humble in his preparation—ready to be coached and to address his weaknesses—but when he started to perform on the field, he stayed in that preparation state. In practice, the team often played a game called 27 outs, which simulated the pressure of a real game by challenging the fielders to play error-free and make 27 outs—the same number needed in a nine-inning baseball game. Jon struggled mightily and talked with me about failing to make routine plays that typically were seamless for him. Jon was overanalyzing, doubting himself when the pressure was on, and this mindset that helped him prepare so thoroughly and carefully was crushing his ability to deliver a strong performance. We had work to do.

I chatted with Jon over the next month about his confidence and where he felt like he had the most of it. He explained that he never lacked confidence when talking to girls and that he felt he had “game.” He had a girlfriend at the time, so he decided to ask her what his mindset was when they first met and reflect on his approach to that meeting. A few weeks later, Jon sent me an email with his findings, including:

I believe in myself (very confident).

I know what I’m going to say before I say it (game plan).

I know that I know how to talk to girls (I am competent).

I don’t put any pressure on myself.

Relaxed.

Not humble (cocky).

Both of us were excited by what Jon had learned and our conversations about bringing this type of confidence into baseball. But the following year brought mixed results. He was in and out of the lineup, and finished the season with a .200 batting average. I was perplexed. How could someone who worked so hard and was so confident away from the field struggle once he got

between the lines during performance? Was it really a confidence issue, or was something else getting in the way?

We worked on mental skills like self-talk, circle breathing, and visualization. Jon established goals for himself that would help him improve. We determined which systems and processes would allow him to execute plays at his best when it mattered most. His self-awareness was growing, and he had a whole book's worth of notes as we approached the next season. Jon was all in.

Once again, though, Jon had highs and lows; in one game he hit two home runs, and in the next he had two strikeouts. Sometimes, he would come into our meetings frustrated and upset, but he never left a meeting feeling that way. He had so much hope, and he continued to work hard. We continued our weekly meetings and built his mental toolbox. Yet Jon still was not getting the results we both knew he was capable of getting. What was I missing? I was puzzled.

Jon finished the season with a solid batting average (.265). He had certainly improved. And when I measured his mental strengths and weaknesses from where we had started, he scored higher across the board. Jon's hard work, attitude, and flashes of success helped him earn a scholarship to play Division II baseball—but he didn't achieve his dream of playing pro ball, never quite performing at the peak of his potential when it mattered most.

As I reflected on my time with Jon, I continued to wonder what was getting in the way. I looked back on my database of research, videos, books, and podcasts, and a broader pattern emerged: the best performers in the world shifted their mindset between *preparation* and *performance*. Maximizing our preparation requires one mindset. Performing at our peak potential requires a different one.

For years, I studied this binary relationship between the preparation mind and the performance mind. Over and over in my research, my reading, and my interviews and work with elite athletes, top students, Navy SEALs, and successful executives, I came to three critical realizations:

- What we think—and *when*—dictates how far we can go and what we're capable of when it's time to deliver.
- The preparation mind and the performance mind are not just

different—they are often opposites.

- We need to *practice* the performance mind in order to leverage it when the time comes.

Jon's story was an important one for me. Years later I realized, first, that Jon didn't need just confidence; he needed arrogance. (Yes, I disagree with one of the great coaches of the NFL!) He needed confidence all the time, but when he was on the field, he needed an absolute and unshakable belief that he was the best person for the job in the moment. Second, I realized that I had not helped him (or at least not enough) *practice* and develop that mindset. We thought that recognizing where he did have confidence (in dating) would be enough to help him transfer it to the field. It wasn't.

As I worked to understand the binary relationships better, I would ask clients: What shifts exist between the preparation and performance mindsets? After we drew a line down the middle of a piece of paper and listed the shifts, I would ask which list best described their approach. A majority of them would pick the preparation mindset. I spoke to high school, college, and pro sports teams to get their opinions on the two mindsets, and noticed that even some of the pros leaned more toward the preparation mind. As we learn and train, we place emphasis on the thinking required for good preparation—but both mindsets are absolutely necessary.

Another challenge we face in building our mental strength is that some mindsets that are ideal for preparation or performance are counterintuitive or are derided by society. For instance, when you're performing, you shouldn't pay attention to the *outcome* of your performance—the score, how a play went, how well a joke landed, how a client responded to a line in a sales pitch. It may seem contradictory, but it's true. I promise! And think about how highly we value humility and disparage arrogance or perfectionism or selfishness—all of which are necessary at times. These constructs are neither good nor bad. We simply lack appreciation for the polarity of the preparation versus the performance mind and for the positive impact that each can have on the other.

Our biggest challenge, though, is this: because we don't think about the very different minds required for true success, we use each one at the wrong times. Jon let his humility leak into his performance, and it had a seriously negative impact. I've seen this same behavior over and over, and I've seen the reverse: athletes too arrogant to accept the coaching they need during

preparation so they can be their best on the field or court. In fact, I've seen this "transfer" problem with every shift introduced in this book, and I believe it's the cause of most performance problems. More than likely, it's holding *you* back in some way, too.

Where does this leave us?

I am convinced that the shifts discussed in this book are essential for maximizing your performance. The concept has helped athletes better understand how to perform in front of 20,000 people, has helped CEOs perform in board meetings, and has helped students perform on their SATs. This simple framework helps create clarity about what is necessary when the world is watching *and* when nobody is watching. The approach works just like shooting mechanics in basketball, open-ended questions for salespeople, and breathing exercises for a musician. It does not give you the answer or guarantee a result, but it does give you parameters to set yourself up for success.

This book is for anyone who is serious about unlocking their potential. You may not be an athlete or a musician or a famous speaker, but in some aspect of your life, you are a performer. We are all performers, whether we're explaining a big change to a team we lead at work, handling a difficult client situation in the heat of the moment, delivering a keynote speech to a few hundred people, or even talking about an important topic with our kids. Regardless of what performance looks like for you, you don't have to be a pro to *think like* a pro. That's the beauty of the mind. You can perform like LeBron James while playing pickup ball on a Wednesday night at the local high school, even if you've never experienced the sheer physical force of flying high and dunking the basketball through a metal rim.

I believe the shifts offer a framework that can help you perform at your best, no matter where you are, who you are performing for, or what level you are performing at. They serve as a guide for you to think about how you are setting your mind—shifting between preparation and performance, depending on the moment. We all have the necessary preparation mind and performance mind within us. The goal is to become more intentional in both how you leverage each and when you make the shift—and in turn, to become more confident and successful.

Preparation, Performance, and Practice

People in Tom Coughlin's world, the National Football League (NFL), spend most of their time preparing; they play sixteen games a year, and they spend six out of seven days a week preparing for those sixteen game days. If you do the math you'll find that basketball players, who play eighty-two regular-season games a year, spend about twelve times the number of hours preparing as they do performing. Golf is a sport that takes hours or even days to play, but professional golfers still spend far more time preparing and practicing than they do performing in tournaments. The same is true for all of us: the time we spend actually performing is almost always a fraction of the time we spend preparing. It's no wonder our mindset often leans in the direction of preparation.

But what is the actual difference between preparation and performance? If we want to understand why we need to shift our mindset in order to fulfill our potential, the distinction matters:

- *Preparation* is the action or process of making ourselves ready and competent.
- *Performance* is the execution of actions that will be evaluated in some way.

Often, preparation is something we do alone, or at least away from our final audience or opponent, while performance can feel like standing in a spotlight in a packed theater (and sometimes is exactly that). Preparation involves learning, growing, and improving, whereas performance is pure execution, carrying out an action or pattern of behavior designed to achieve a goal.

I've found that most people don't spend time thinking about these differences in their work and personal lives. And yet preparation and performance often are different for each of us. For instance, when is a leader preparing, and when is he or she performing? When is a salesperson preparing versus performing? What about a parent? Understanding the "when" means we have to understand the nuances of preparation and performance—so we can shift our mind appropriately.

Pause for a moment and think about the difference between preparation

and performance in your work. What does each look like? As you read about the shifts, you'll be able to better identify the two, and that will give you leverage.

Of course, you can't talk about preparation without talking about practice, and yet the two are not the same. Coughlin's book *Earn the Right to Win* hammered home the importance of preparation in this way: "You earn the right to win on the practice field. Practice is the essential core of preparation. It's where a team builds its toughness."² That distinction between practice and preparation was important to Coughlin. "Contrary to common belief," he explains, "there is actually very little teaching that takes place during practice. The field is not the place for lengthy, detailed instruction or evaluation. The teaching takes place in the classroom both before and after we're on the practice field, and because of that we spend significantly more time in the classroom than on the field."³

Practice is the action of working at something repeatedly so as to become proficient. This matters because we can each build our mental "toughness," to use Coughlin's word, by practicing the preparation mind and the performance mind. Most of us spend so little time actually performing that we have to be intentional about using our practice time to work on the performance mind. Yet we have gone so far in our praise of preparation and practice that we have forgotten about the importance of performing. We do a bad job of preparing ourselves to perform, and instead prepare ourselves to simply be good at practicing. That was essentially the problem for Jon, the baseball player.

If this book does anything at all, I hope it inspires you to perform at your best by leveraging your preparation mind—and letting go of it when the time is right. I hope you get clarity around what preparation, performance, and practice look like for you.

How This Book Can Boost Your Performance

The great performers know that the person they are on the big stage does not need to be the same as who they are away from it. They can shift. None of us are the same person at all times. Authenticity is elastic, not rigid. What's most important to recognize as you head into this book is that you don't have to be the same person in preparation and performance, and in fact you really shouldn't be. The goal is to be intentional about the shift—like the greats are.

Recognizing and understanding these shifts can help you perform better. You can develop them, just as you would develop a muscle. In my work over the years, I have collected and studied more than thirty shifts. When writing this book, though, I thought it was important to distill the most important and universal, and use them to capture most of the others. These constructs and shifts are not random; refining them was an arduous task. The goal is to help you focus on those elements of the preparation and performance minds that will make the greatest difference for you.

Shift by shift, I will break down each of them. Some may resonate with you more than others—that's OK. The key is to focus on those that are most important to you and your craft or that you think may be limiting your performance. As I explore each shift, I'll explain how the two minds—preparation and performance—are different, how leveraging the wrong mind at the wrong time can create major performance hurdles, and what the psychology and neuroscience research has shown us to be true about how these minds work for us and against us. I'll share stories of some of the best performers in the world and how they have used these shifts to succeed or have struggled to develop the right mind at the right time. And I will show you how the preparation mind, if managed properly, actually supports the performance mind.

The last section of every shift is designed to help you practice so you can become stronger mentally. I offer techniques, exercises, and tips for practicing both minds. The more you practice with intention, the easier and more natural it will be to shift your mind when it truly counts.

This book is about thinking right. It will help you better understand that *when* you think matters as much as *what* you think. So join me as we explore

the preparation mind, the performance mind, and how radically different they are.

Let's get started.

On April 30, 2006, as a senior at Syracuse University, I entered the Carrier Dome for a concert that had set a record for student-ticket sales. To understand the energy outside the Dome as we waited to get in, you need to have been on a college campus from 2004 to 2006. For two years, everywhere I went, the music of one rapper was blaring from open dorm windows and open car windows and anywhere there was a party. His music was catchy and upbeat, and it didn't hurt that his albums were titled *The College Dropout* and *Late Registration*. It wasn't my favorite music, but my head nodded to the beat and my feet moved every time it came on. Like my fellow students, I was excited to see this rising superstar in person.

The rapper, of course, was Kanye West.

I entered the Dome as the opening act was finishing and took my seat on a silver bleacher. When Kanye finally came on stage, wearing sunglasses, a hoodie, and his notorious swagger, he had a presence that lifted the stadium. We all roared. Then, without hesitation, he greeted the crowd by saying, "I've worked so hard to be where I am. I can say it: I am the shit."⁴ Between each song, he exclaimed that he was the greatest, the best. To say Kanye was arrogant during his performance is an understatement; it bordered on narcissism.

Although known for his personal eccentricities, Kanye demonstrates the value of arrogance every time he takes the stage. While it might be the only advice worth taking from him, there's something to be learned from Kanye's approach to performance. His journey, especially the trajectory of his early career, is remarkable. In his early twenties, he was already a hit producer. He had a watershed moment at the age of twenty-five when he survived a near-deadly car accident, which left his jaw wired shut. The accident served as inspiration for him to go from producer to rapper, and he recorded his hit song "Through the Wire" just two weeks after his surgery and with his jaw

still wired shut.⁵

Kanye once proclaimed, “I am the number one most impactful artist of our generation. I am Shakespeare in the flesh.”⁶ Of course, Lil Wayne announced he was the greatest of all time in 2005; Jay-Z and Nas battled over who was better, as did Biggie and 2Pac; and LL Cool J released an album titled *G.O.A.T.*, which means “greatest of all time.” Music, and specifically rap, has had a long-standing relationship with arrogance. Perhaps it stems from the purest form of rap, known as “battling,” where an artist challenges another to a freestyle competition in which the two test their ability to deliver uniquely innovative lyrics from brain to mouth in an instant.

But arrogance isn’t unique to the world of rap. In fact, I would argue that arrogance is essential to any performance. To perform well, you may not need to believe that you’re the greatest of all time, but you do need an unwavering, even exaggerated belief that you are the absolute best person for the job in the moment. This belief gets you past any self-doubt that might crop up in the middle of a performance when something goes wrong: you miss a shot, you get a client’s name wrong, you flub up a speech. While certainly humility is important, and a society brimming with arrogance at every corner would not be pleasant, performers in the moment thrive on arrogance. When the lights are on, if you don’t believe in yourself absolutely, nobody else will.

But imagine that same level of belief that you’re the best while you’re preparing or training or learning—or anytime when you are not, or shouldn’t be, in the spotlight. Total disaster.

Again, Kanye is a perfect example.

Three years after I saw him perform, he walked onstage at the MTV Video Music Awards twenty seconds into Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech for best video (“You Belong to Me”) by a female artist. His off-balance arrogance made him believe he had the right to humiliate her on stage by taking the microphone from her and proclaiming his opinion that Beyoncé’s video for “Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)” was one of the best of all time.

Arrogance in the wrong situation—basically any time when you aren’t performing—makes you look like a jackass (not to quote anybody specific here) or a bully. The repercussions for people who bear the brunt of it can be considerable.

At the time, nineteen years old and two albums into a stunning career trajectory, Taylor Swift was known for being nice, sweet, innocent. Early in

her 2020 documentary, *Miss Americana*, she says, “My entire moral code, as a kid and now, is a need to be thought of as good. . . . I’ve been trained to be happy when you get a lot of praise.”⁷ Then, later in the film: “When you’re living for the approval of strangers and that is where you derive all of your joy and fulfillment, one bad thing can cause everything to crumble.” Of course, that bad thing was the moment with Kanye.

It shook Swift, but it was also a catalyst. Despite the fact that she had already achieved incredible success through “hard work and being nice,” she questioned whether she deserved to be there. Getting to the other side of that moment, and what it revealed to her about her lack of confidence, made her stronger. She needed arrogance, and she found it as she bounced back. She stood up for herself and became a stronger businesswoman. She took some blows and didn’t fall down. And she found her voice. Regardless of what you think of Swift or her music, you can’t discount her talent, her ability to engage her fans, and the level of inner belief—arrogance—it takes to keep coming back, keep putting herself out there.

In preparation, arrogance makes you look like somebody who can’t handle feedback because your ego just won’t let you believe you have any weaknesses, limitations, or opportunities to improve. For me, one of the most compelling moments in Taylor Swift’s documentary is when she finds out that *Reputation*, the best-selling album of 2018, was nominated in just one Grammy Award category (she’s used to multiple nominations). Swift is clearly upset, but she says to the person on the phone, “This is fine. . . . I just need to make a better record.”

In preparation, lack of humility is a recipe for disaster. Flipping it around, though, is equally disastrous. What would a Kanye West performance or a Taylor Swift show be like if they came out on stage worried about all the ways they needed to improve, and all the rappers or singers who might be better than them? Would they have the same presence, the same power as performers, or would they leave the crowd disappointed?

We’ve all seen people who have been humble in their performance or arrogant in their preparation. It is not uncommon for people who are labeled as “uncoachable” to miss out on career opportunities. It is not uncommon for people who are hesitant or wishy-washy in a performance to lose a sale, to fall flat with an audience, to choke under pressure. You may have even experienced these hiccups in your career or personal life. Without humble

preparation, it's hard to deliver. Without arrogant performance, it's hard to make an impact.

We need to be humble in preparation so that we improve, improve, improve, which frees us to be arrogant in performance. Once we're offstage, *we have to shift back* so we can review our performance, take feedback, improve some more, and build up the unshakeable belief that we will nail it when the curtain goes up.

You might wonder why I'm using the word "arrogance" instead of "confidence." We need confidence all the time—when we're preparing and performing alike. Confidence helps us trust that no matter what, we have the ability to find a way forward, to make progress. We can be both confident and humble. Confidence is less fierce and potent than arrogance, though. That's one reason it is seen as positive whereas arrogance is seen as negative—and it's why we need a self-belief that's bigger and stronger when it's time to deliver the goods.

The world's best performers combine humble preparation with arrogant performance. Frank Lloyd Wright, who is considered the greatest American architect of all time, once said, "Early in life I had to choose between honest arrogance and hypocritical humility. I chose honest arrogance and have seen no occasion to change."⁸ But I argue that you don't have to choose between arrogance and humility; they are both useful mindsets. When the lights are on, choose arrogance, but when the arena empties, bring back the humility. The key is to learn when and how to shift from one to the other.

Growth Requires Humility

Carli Lloyd has become one of the greatest soccer players ever, but there was a time when it looked like she wouldn't become a pro. Growing up, Lloyd relied on her talent. As she explained in an interview: "There'd be days where I went out onto the field and I felt like giving eighty percent, and I just gave eighty percent. And it was better than most people's one hundred percent."⁹ It's not surprising, then, that she admits, "When I was younger, I didn't like taking and accepting criticism. I didn't like to be told I was wrong."¹⁰ Lloyd didn't realize that if she wanted to become one of the best, she had to train as if she wasn't one of the best. Lloyd credits her trainer, James Galanis, with whom

she started working in 2003, as the reason for her changed ways.

Galanis points out, “She loved working with the ball, obviously, but she didn’t know how to think. . . . She was full of excuses.”¹¹ Instead of looking inward, young Lloyd would blame coaches, teammates, and anyone but herself for her lack of playing time or success. That’s what ego in preparation can look like: blame and excuses. Galanis helped her look inward and take control of her career. She started to accept her weaknesses, see areas where she could improve, and find ways to gain an edge. Her transformation was physical, technical, and mental.

Lloyd joined the under-21 national team and seemed to be heading in the right direction when she was abruptly cut from the team. She describes the pain that she felt over getting cut: “Tears were rolling down, and I just thought, *This is probably it. I can’t do this anymore.*”¹²

Galanis points out, “I think it was great that she got cut. She was sailing as a youngster, and I think that cut just really made her realize that she’s not the greatest and if she wants to be the greatest, she’s going to have to roll the sleeves up every day and work hard and get to the top.”¹³ The experience helped Lloyd learn that humble critique—of herself—in preparation was necessary if she wanted to play at the highest level. When she started doing that, no stage was too big for her. Lloyd ended up getting an invite back to the under-21 team after a player got hurt, and she used the opportunity to hold herself accountable—to her own high expectations for growth.

Imagine if Lloyd had never been coached or critiqued. Imagine if she never learned to look inward and find ways to get better. Would she have become the first female player to score three goals in a World Cup final, or become a two-time Olympic gold medalist, or earned the FIFA World Player of the Year award twice?¹⁴ I doubt it.

Humility helps us recognize opportunities to learn, get help from others, and remain open-minded. It’s terrific for preparation, which is when we need to be challenged and focused on growth. It’s hard to grow when we believe our “talent” will carry us.

What Humble Really Looks Like

Michael Johnson and Terry Mitchell, both professors at the Foster School of Business at the University of Washington, teamed up with Bradley Owens, a

former doctoral student, to study humility. Their research broke humility down into three components: an accurate view of the self, teachability, and appreciation of others' strengths.¹⁵

Humility requires self-awareness—that accurate view of the self. In my work with athletes and executives over the years, I have seen how self-awareness can unlock someone's potential and how the lack thereof can lead to complacency. However, humble preparation doesn't just require awareness; it also requires a willingness to *do something* with what we discover about ourselves. Humble preparers learn from others in and outside of their field to better themselves; they seek advice from mentors and coaches, and they stay open to possibilities rather than simply believing that their way is the right way.

Unsurprisingly, then, Johnson and Mitchell's research found that humility is a game changer when looking at performance. "Two of the best predictors of performance—both academic and on the job—are intelligence and conscientiousness," Johnson says. "We found that humility predicted performance better than both."¹⁶ The study went on to reveal that humility can even compensate for lower levels of intelligence. Another study, out of Duke, found that humble participants were more likely to perform better on memory tasks.¹⁷ The humble students continued to try to improve—to memorize better—when preparing.

Intellectual humility, just one more aspect of this concept, is an acknowledgement that you might be wrong. (Yes, you.) When we have intellectual humility, we create a space for possibility and an openness to others' ideas—about how to train, how to improve, how to shift our next performance based on changes in our environment. After all, the best idea today won't be the best idea a year from now.

Researchers Ethan Kross and Igor Grossman published a study that found a correlation between intellectual humility and wisdom.¹⁸ For performers, both openness and wisdom are essential—in preparation. Great performers will consider their options, listen to feedback, and ultimately be open to changing their behavior based on what they learn. During preparation, a great performer will always ask, "What am I missing?" That's intellectual humility. Laszlo Bock, a VP at Google in charge of hiring, has said that intellectual humility is one of the top qualities the company looks for. Without it, he explains, "You are unable to learn."¹⁹

From 2007 to 2013, it was hard to find a more respected coach in college basketball than Brad Stevens of Butler University. Stevens, now head coach of the Boston Celtics, took Butler to the NCAA Tournament five out of the six seasons he was there and set an NCAA record for the most wins in a coach's first three seasons. I spoke with Coach Stevens in December 2012 while he was in the heart of his season. I knew a bit about the culture Stevens had created at Butler and was anxious to get more insight into what made the team special. I have spoken with many successful people, in a number of professions, and often my conversations are similar to an interview; I ask a question, and they talk about themselves, which is what I am hoping they'll do. With Stevens, however, I didn't get to my first question until he had asked me five of them—about my story, my mental coaching practice, and my philosophy. About halfway through the call, I pivoted and finally got to pick his brain a bit. But my big takeaway was his openness to my ideas and his desire to learn and even take some of my ideas and implement them with his team. Don't get me wrong; he knew who he was as a coach, and he had enough ego. But his humility and desire to learn were what stood out.

As Bill Gates once said, "Success is a lousy teacher. It seduces people into thinking they cannot lose."²⁰ Why? Because it convinces them they have nothing to learn, no need for improvement. So, yes, we value humility in the preparation process so we can keep advancing, keep getting better, keep absorbing new ideas—but we need to be able to shift away from humility when it's time to execute or perform.

You Can't Beat My Arrogance

Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson are considered to be two of the best baseball players of all time. Paige was an intimidating pitcher (he stood at six foot three) who played professional baseball in the Negro League until he was forty-seven years old.²¹ He used to participate in playing tours across the United States and would have his infielders sit down on the field behind him, as if to say they wouldn't be needed while he was on the mound—and yes, he would often strike out the other team.²² Although he was likely born in 1906, Paige rarely answered a direct question about his age, and was known to say instead, "Age is a question of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't

matter.” In his late fifties, he briefly came out of retirement to pitch three scoreless innings for the Kansas City Athletics—the power of inner arrogance in action.

Gibson’s story is just as impressive. He was considered the best hitter in baseball during his era, having amassed more than 800 home runs over a seventeen-year career. Each believed he was the greatest in the world at his job, but because the two played on the same team, they never could have bragging rights over each other. That all changed in 1942.

The confrontation between Paige and Gibson has become the stuff of baseball legend, so varying accounts make it hard to pin down the exact details. For our purposes, we’ll go with this version: It was a game in September, in the ninth inning, with two outs left and the bases loaded. Gibson and Paige were no longer teammates and were now facing each other in this critical moment. But it didn’t have to be that way. You see, with a runner on third base, Paige requested a time-out. He walked over to first baseman Buck O’Neil and said he was going to walk the next two batters so he could face Gibson with the bases loaded. That’s right—he intentionally walked the other batters just so he could face the best hitter in baseball with the bases loaded. That’s arrogance.

Forty thousand people rose to their feet as Paige told Gibson he was going to throw him a fastball, and before anyone could blink, that ball whizzed by Gibson. Strike one. Paige headed back to the mound and declared he would throw another fastball, and boom! Strike two. For the third pitch, Paige again declared he would throw a strike. He wound up and delivered the third pitch right by Gibson. Strike three. Then Paige walked off the mound, looked Gibson in the eye, and said, “Nobody hits Satchel’s fastball.”²³

Harvey Dorfman and Karl Kuehl, in their legendary book *The Mental Game of Baseball*, share a quote from Hall of Fame second baseman Joe Morgan: “To be a star and stay a star, I think you’ve got to have a certain air of arrogance about you, a cockiness, a swagger on the field that says, ‘I can do this and you can’t stop me.’ I know that I played baseball with this air of arrogance, but I think it’s lacking in a lot of guys who have the potential to be stars.”²⁴

Floyd Mayweather, the undefeated boxer, has gotten some flak for making his self-belief abundantly clear by saying, “Ali was a great fighter, but I’m better. [Sugar Ray] Robinson was a great fighter, but I’m better.”²⁵

Tennis megastar Serena Williams, who won the Australian Open while pregnant and is considered one of the best athletes of all time, once said, “I always say that when I’m playing well, no one can beat me. I’m not just saying that to sound full of myself or anything, but it’s true.”²⁶

And the soccer superstar Cristiano Ronaldo once said in an interview, “There are people out there who hate me and who say I’m arrogant, vain and whatever. That’s all part of my success. I am made to be the best.”²⁷ Society often is critical of these kinds of statements or behaviors, but the players are just giving a behind-the-curtain look into their arrogance when they are in the arena.

Legendary athletes leverage their inner arrogance when they’re on the field or court, but it’s important for any of us when we’re performing. Having complete faith in your ability, holding on to the idea that you’re the best person for the job in the moment, regardless of the outcome, is an approach seen in successful boardrooms, sales presentations, and investment pitches all over the world. In order to change the world, even in small ways, you need humility *and* arrogance. It’s just a matter of when to use each.

While society sometimes cringes at arrogance, science suggests it can be useful. Intellectual humility can have a big impact on learning, but when it comes to grades and test scores, intellectual arrogance can also be important. Research published in the *Journal of Research in Personality* found that students with greater intellectual arrogance, or an exaggerated belief in their abilities, achieved better individual grades.²⁸ The research did note that those with intellectual arrogance were not necessarily admired by their peers, which can be a challenge in group or team dynamics. I believe, though, that when a performer can balance humility in preparation with arrogance during performance, the group won’t perceive the performer in the same negative light. At performance time, the most important thing a teammate wants to know is whether the person next to them can deliver. That’s difficult to do if you don’t believe, absolutely, that you can. The power of arrogant performance is real.

In one of my favorite podcasts, *Big Questions with Cal Fussman*, world-renowned surgeon Dr. Oz tells a story of a difficult surgery and the mindset he had in the operating theater. “Surgery is controlled arrogance,” he explains. “You’ve gotta be honest about it. Who thinks they can take a band saw to someone’s chest and help them? How many people take a scalpel and cut

somebody and think it's good for everybody? Right, you gotta be a little arrogant to think that's possible.”²⁹

In a conversation on my *Intentional Performers* podcast, Mario Romero, a former Navy SEAL, told me, “We see ourselves as almost immortal when we go out in combat. . . . It almost felt like we were untouchable out there; it almost felt like we were cocky. I dared the enemy to come after us.”³⁰ And yet in preparation, he explained, they shift into a highly critical mindset, doing everything possible to improve as a unit. Whether it's a surgical technique, a military maneuver, a birdie putt, a three-point shot, or a sales pitch, cultivating the arrogant performance mind will give a performer a great opportunity to execute successfully.

As I said at the start of this shift, confidence is something you need all of the time, even when preparing—but it's often not enough when you're under the pressure of performance. In those moments, you need a little arrogance, despite what we've all been taught about it. Strong performers will not let arrogance completely dictate their decision-making but will make sure that when it's time to execute, they do so with an unshakeable, over-the-top belief in their ability.

Can a Good Leader Be Arrogant?

More than a decade ago, leadership and management guru Jim Collins described the five levels of leadership, including a Level 5 leader—someone who possesses both humility and professional will. Collins has used phrases like *iron will* and *fierce resolve* to clarify that second part.³¹ Those phrases may be more acceptable than *arrogance*, but in critical leadership moments, I think that's what we're really talking about.

Dr. Travis Bradberry, a leading expert on emotional intelligence, says, “Few things kill likeability as quickly as arrogance. Likeable leaders don't act as though they're better than you because they don't *think* that they're better than you.”³² That may be true 90 percent of the time—when they are coaching others, helping solve a process problem, developing strategy, shaping a vision. About 10 percent of the time, though, when they are *performing*—making a hard decision, pushing forward with a not-so-popular change, executing a strategy despite obstacles—they must have that fierce resolve and absolute inner faith that they're the best person with the best idea or plan in the

moment, despite what others may think. Great leaders are willing to challenge the status quo and take risks, and often they have to make unpopular and unlikeable decisions that they believe are best for those whom they serve. Leaders absolutely need humility when preparing, and they spend most of their time in preparation mode, but they also need arrogance, even if just in short bursts.

You'll certainly find a lot of sound research that shows arrogance can have a negative impact on your ability to lead. But the real problem is that many leaders bring arrogance into moments when their team needs them to be humble. And, of course, research has also shown that leaders do the opposite, too. In the *Harvard Business Review* article "Research: When Being a Humble Leader Backfires," professors from Ohio State University and Portland State University share their discoveries about the paradox of our expectations of leaders. One of the key findings is that "on teams where members expected leaders to be dominant and powerful, humble leaders were met with doubt and team members felt unsafe to speak up and take risks."³³

No matter who you are, but especially if you're a leader, *when* you leverage arrogance dictates whether or not it's helpful.

And by the way, you don't have to look much further than Dr. Bradberry to see arrogant performance. His bio describes his company, TalentSmart, as "the world's premier provider of emotional intelligence (EQ). More than 75 percent of the Fortune 500 companies rely on our products and services."³⁴ Those statistics inspire confidence in the company, but it also seems a bit arrogant, eh?

Arrogance Ain't Easy

As visible as arrogance is among top performers, I've seen many others struggle with some form or level of imposter syndrome as they climb the performance mountain—athletes who wonder whether they deserve to be in the pros, for instance. My clients often need more arrogance when performing rather than less; their inability to tap into their inner arrogance holds them back from their peak potential.

People struggle for many reasons to bring out their inner arrogance when it matters most, but I believe it stems from risk aversion. A performance brings judgment; there is something on the line. To tap into the raw, uncut,

arrogant self has consequences. What if it doesn't work? What if you fully believe in yourself but don't get the results you were looking for? It's a lot safer, both socially and psychologically, to downplay your potential, to not take a risk, than it is to believe in the very best version of yourself, go all in, and fail.

Arrogant performers, on the other hand, will stick their necks out without caring about how they are going to be judged. And yet one of the hottest topics during the 2019 Women's World Cup was the attitude of the US national team. One *Newsweek* headline read, "American Soccer Team 'So Arrogant' Even the French Want England to Win."³⁵ The biggest issue, many said, was how much they celebrated each goal over a much weaker team. But on the other side of the argument were those who recognized what it takes to succeed in the highest-stakes performance of one's career. I was one of them, and while some criticized or complained, I cheered the team on.

Many people raised the question of whether the US team's behavior would have been judged as harshly if they were men. It is no accident that many of the arrogant performers I listed earlier in this shift are male. We've all seen the research (or personally experienced) that too often, when women assert themselves, they're labeled as bossy or a bitch—something influential women are speaking out about.³⁶ Recently, however, a female member of an executive team expressed concern, from a woman's perspective, about the concept of arrogance. I also had a male CEO ask me why we even had to talk about gender differences. Despite the fact that arrogance is universally necessary, it isn't universally accepted—for men and especially for women.

I have observed a gender gap in the ability to leverage inner arrogance for performance, and in the accumulation of confidence that we can rely on at any time. A study found that 70 percent of male managers have high or quite high levels of self-confidence. That same study found that more men (15.7 percent) have a high level of personal confidence and rarely feel any self-doubt compared with women (4.7 percent).³⁷ While certainly these statistics do not apply to *all* men and women, the women in leadership roles and female athletes tend to over-index on humility and under-index on arrogance. If you're avoiding arrogance out of misplaced humility, that might limit you. When women do step into that space, we should empower them and cheer them on, not stifle them.

The challenges of embracing arrogance aren't limited to women, though. Imposter syndrome is a prime example. Feeling like an imposter is a common

human experience. Ever get a new job and not believe you were truly qualified? How about that first day of class in college? Or that time you went on a date with someone you thought was out of your league? The phenomenon of imposter syndrome was described for the first time in 1978 when psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes published their research on how women often feel like imposters even when they are incredibly qualified. Since then, research has shown that an estimated 70 percent of people have those feelings at some point in their lives.³⁸ In all likelihood you are part of that 70 percent! What's especially interesting, as it relates to the performance mind, is the research that has found imposter syndrome impacts men even more than women.³⁹

There are plenty of books about the importance of humility, and I recommend them all: *Earn the Right to Win* by Tom Coughlin, *Grit* by Angela Duckworth, *Talent Is Overrated* by Geoff Colvin, and many others. But books on building arrogance? Not so much. Arrogance can be learned, though. I have worked with a number of collegiate athletes in a host of different sports, and when I ask what they want to work on, most of them say confidence. I often challenge them to search for why they are important and able, and then help them exaggerate those beliefs just before a performance. Learning arrogance just takes some open-mindedness—and perhaps some humble preparation—to bring it to the forefront. Later in the chapter, I'll share activities to help you do just that.

The Humility/Arrogance Cocktail

In professional baseball, a player's monetary value is determined through a process called pay arbitration. Seasoned players especially will undergo this process in order to find out their worth, in dollars, to the team. The outcome of pay arbitration is used to guide pay negotiations—so this is a stressful process for the player. Sometimes a player finds out that he is worth less than he assumed, and this is called “losing arbitration.” For our purposes, pay arbitration provides an interesting example of how humility and arrogance can contribute to our overall view of ourselves.

In 2014, a study looked at how high-status players handled being told they were worth less than they thought. One article recapped the findings: “In the

58 percent of the arbitrations where players lost, [the research showed] that the higher the status of a player, the greater the fall-off in performance the following year.”⁴⁰ Lower-status players who had not received accolades in their career were not impacted much by losing arbitration. I would argue that this research speaks to how humility actually supports arrogance. Those who were more humble were able to maintain their belief in themselves during performance. Those who were less humble, because they had let their successes reduce that humility, struggled to do the same.

Interestingly, for the players who won arbitration—who were valued for what they assumed they were worth or more—their belief in their ability to perform seemed to rise as well; the high-status group performed about 70 percent above the sample average during the post-arbitration season.⁴¹ The lesson here is that instead of waiting for others to instill in them a sense of self-belief, the greatest performers rely on themselves for that. Believing in yourself more than depending on others to believe in you is essential, even if that belief is exaggerated. You can’t build that genuine belief within yourself, however, if you aren’t humble enough the rest of the time to tackle your weaknesses, stay coachable, and continue to improve.

Humility in preparation has no boundaries; we can constantly grow, improve, get better. Think about how much time you spend preparing compared with how much time you spend performing. But too much of anything can be a bad thing, and that is true of both arrogance and humility. As with any of the shifts we’ll discuss in this book, the important factor is *when*. When asked about his “flashy style” on the field, Deion Sanders—who played two sports professionally at the same time—said, “You’re talking about a personality I created when I was playing . . . ‘Primetime.’ That’s not Deion. Deion is a very different person.”⁴² Arrogance in performance is limited to the actual moment of performance: a sales call, a forty-minute basketball game, karaoke night with your friends. The greats know when and how to shift between the two.

Stephen Curry is an NBA player who strikingly combines humility and arrogance. He is a soft-spoken, baby-faced guard who has taken the NBA by storm, winning the MVP award twice. Although he grew up the son of a professional basketball player, Curry was overlooked because of his slight frame coming out of high school. His dad’s alma mater (Virginia Tech) only offered him a spot as a walk-on, so instead he took a full scholarship at

Davidson. Curry set the college basketball world on fire as he led Davidson to two straight NCAA Tournament appearances and averaged 25.3 points per game.⁴³ He was the seventh pick of the NBA draft, although people still doubted whether or not he could transition to the pros. Those critics were quickly silenced.

Curry's workouts are legendary—dribbling with two balls at a time and catching a tennis ball while doing so, blindfolded; forcing himself to make a certain number of shots before leaving the gym; and so on. He is never complacent. His teammates often say that his desire to constantly improve helps push them. His coach, Steve Kerr, has described Curry as compassionate, humble, modest, and funny. “And yet,” he said in a conversation with coach Phil Jackson, “he has this great arrogance on the floor, where he knows he’s the best player out there. Pretty wicked package. Very few players I’ve ever been around have possessed that combination.”⁴⁴

Kerr recognizes that it takes arrogance to do what Curry does—to believe that he is in three-point range as soon as he crosses half-court. And Kerr fuels that arrogance at performance time. During one game, Kerr put his arm around Curry as they walked into the locker room at halftime and said, “One of the things I love about you is you’re two for eleven and you have no hesitation shooting a sixty-footer. Nobody in the league does that.”⁴⁵

Curry. Satchel. Lloyd. Study a great performer, and you will find this potent cocktail of humble preparation and arrogant performance. But how do you get the humility-arrogance cocktail?

Exercise Section

Becoming More Humble and Arrogant

More than a decade after seeing Kanye's arrogance in person, I found myself in a gym rebounding the basketball for a high school senior named Jared. It was my first year working with this high school boys' basketball team, and they had big expectations for their upcoming season. I had developed a relationship with Jared, a sharp shooting guard who would later play Division I basketball. At critical moments during games, Jared would sometimes let self-doubt creep in, which resulted in multiple missed shots in a row. So we began a pregame ritual.

I would ask him how good of a shooter he was.

He would answer, "The best shooter on the team."

I would challenge him to go further.

He would answer, "The best shooter in the conference."

I would nod my head.

He would say, "The best shooter in the country."

I would nudge again.

At last he would say, "I am the best shooter in the world."

Because what we say about ourselves influences what we think about ourselves.

It was late January, and Jared's team had had a miraculous season in what many consider the toughest high school basketball conference in the country. With his team down one point, Jared squared up his feet, caught a pass from his point guard, and calmly knocked down a three-point shot as the buzzer sounded. The fans rushed the court, and bedlam ensued. A month later, Jared once again made a clutch shot, this time with ten seconds left, to help his team win the championship.

For Jared, the season marked the culmination of four years of humbly building his mind, body, and skills, so he could arrogantly announce that he was the best shooter in the world, even if it was just to me. I watched him work on his arrogance, buy into the idea, and ultimately unlock it from within when he needed it most.

Then there was Eric, a college football player who couldn't have been more different from Jared. When I first met with the coaching staff of his team, they went over some of the players whom they were hoping I could work with. They mentioned Eric and said, "He's one of our more talented guys, but the light hasn't quite gone on for him." Eric was entering his junior year and had shown flashes of promise during the previous seasons, but wasn't delivering on his potential.

During our first meeting together, I asked Eric what his strengths and weaknesses were. He had no problem talking about his strengths—athleticism, drive, speed, confidence. When I asked him for his weaknesses, he looked me straight in the eye and said, "I don't think I have any weaknesses." He was dead serious.

I politely asked him why he wasn't an All-American if he didn't have any weaknesses, and he shrugged his shoulders. He legitimately did not know.

I asked if we could bring his position coach over to get his opinion, and he said, “Sure.” The coach gave three specific examples of what Eric could work on. Eric listened and seemed to soak it all in. He was beginning to find the humility he needed for better preparation. We set some goals for him to attack those weaknesses without diminishing his own arrogant belief in his ability to perform between the lines.

That season, he went on to break school records and became an absolute problem for opposing teams. The combination of humble preparation and arrogance in performance he developed helped him become an impact player from day one in the NFL. Today, when I hear him interviewed, he talks about watching film, studying guys in his position who are successful, and learning from what he did wrong in games. He also talks about staying humble and staying grounded even when he has success.

Like Jared and Eric, you can cultivate your inner arrogance and inner humility. It’s just a matter of your willingness to unlock what is already inside of you, put in the hard work, and be vulnerable.

Below, I’ve shared tactics for cultivating your humility and arrogance. Since you’re reading this book, I am going to assume that like most of my clients, you may already be better at tapping into humble preparation than arrogant performance. Thus, you’ll find more of the strategies are focused on developing arrogance than humility.

Weakness Work

StrengthsFinder by Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton became a best-selling book partially because when you bought the book, you got free access to an assessment that has now been taken by over twenty-one million people. The crux of the concept is that people should focus on their strengths and lean into them if they want to be successful. *StrengthsFinder* is great for performance, but when it comes to preparation, it’s working on our weaknesses that can unlock our ability to grow.

With that in mind, choose an area of your life and create a worksheet like the one shown here. Think about your weaknesses as reasons you might not succeed at your craft. Be specific, and list only things that are in your control. Think about how you can attack those three weaknesses in your preparation. Develop systems and processes to change them. If you’re struggling to identify

weaknesses to work on, try asking others who you trust will be honest and who would genuinely want to help you grow and improve. The process for humble preparation is now underway.

AREA FOR IMPROVEMENT	
Weakness	Solutions
Weakness	Solutions
Weakness	Solutions

Creating Your Inner Kanye

On an index card, write three reasons why you are “the shit” at what you do. Seriously, language matters. Like Kanye, you don’t need to sugarcoat praise when working on your performance mind. I often tell my clients that they should be humble when they talk to the media, their friends, and strangers, but when I meet with them, I need them to check their humility at the door. I need to know the exaggerated truth. So, I want to know the truth—the whole truth—about why you are the shit.

The next step is quite simple. On the other side of the card, write the weaknesses you identified (“I ain’t shit”) that you will attack in your humble preparation. This side balances the first side of the card, which lists what you will leverage in arrogant performance. You need both sides to be as clear as possible, so your mind can have as much clarity as possible. Pull that card out anytime you are preparing or performing. Remind yourself what matters most.

Ticktock Talk

Like a clock, we all have the ability to shift back and forth, tick and tock, in

our mindset. When you have doubtful thoughts or even overly humble thoughts while performing (tick), simply replace those with arrogant thoughts (tock). As with the index card I just described, you can write out common self-doubts that pop up when you're performing and also write out replacement self-applause, so you are ready to combat the ticks with corresponding tocks.

Anti-Goals

I'll write more about the power of goal setting in later shifts, but here let's address a concept that I have come to really appreciate: "anti-goals"—an idea put forth by internet investors Andrew Wilkinson and Chris Sparling. Although we often think about the future in a positive light (and later I'll have more to say on visualization, too), anti-goals prompt you to clearly define what you don't want and to create a plan to avoid it.

Anti-goals allow you to look inward and think about what you don't want to happen. It takes humility to spend time thinking about what we look like at our worst, without it crippling us, and to create a game plan to avoid that version of performance. Here's how to begin:

- **Step 1:** Make a list of five things you don't want to happen during your next performance, whatever that might be.
- **Step 2:** List five actions that you can take prior to or during the performance to avoid those things. Include any specific training, education, or practice you can pursue.

Creating your anti-goals in preparation gives you greater clarity when it's time to perform.

Grandma in Your Back Pocket

Just as Stephen Curry has his coach, Steve Kerr, it's important for you to have someone you respect in your corner, someone who unconditionally believes in you when you are performing. Who can be in your ear to remind you what you are great at? For me, I often think of Grandma Ya. When I played soccer as a kid, my grandma would come watch me play. She was always on the

sidelines, clapping her hands and yelling, “Go, Brian!” No matter if we won 5–0 or lost 5–0, Grandma Ya would always tell me how proud she was of me.

Over the years, I have channeled my grandma when I am performing. Whether I was delivering a big speech for work, taking a test in grad school, or playing basketball on Wednesday nights, I have always tried to have Grandma Ya in my back pocket.

Who is your Grandma Ya? How can you encourage him or her to prime your performance? If you are playing a sport or performing onstage, be clear with your support system about what you need from them when they are in the crowd.

But how will you handle a hostile environment that isn’t filled with “grandmas”? Who else can you surround yourself with when you are performing? Who are you in touch with before a big performance or competition? Extensive scientific research reveals the power of environment on our performance. Make sure you are bringing the right people into your environment whenever possible.

“My Good”

Basketball players are notorious for saying “my bad” when they make a mistake. When I work with them on building their arrogance, one of our goals is a short-term memory so they can forget when they miss their last shot. Great shooters won’t dwell on their previous misses. Rather, they’ll constantly believe the next shot is going in. That’s the arrogance they need to bring to shooting.

When I work with a basketball team, I will often rebound for players, as it’s one of the few times that I can truly get up close and personal with their performance mind. I will grab the rebound and toss the ball back to the players, and they have to say either “my good” (they’re confident the ball will go in) or “next shot” (they believe it will go in next time) as soon as they release the ball from their fingertips. Doing so teaches them the power of quick feedback and setting their performance mind, rather than waiting for the hoop to tell them if it was good or bad.

Think about your own practice habits. How can you use “my good” and “next shot” to cultivate your short-term memory and your arrogant performance mind?

Ever wonder why athletes, musicians, and actors often talk in the third person? Is it narcissism? Perhaps. But a 2010 Michigan State University study found that talking in the third person can actually reduce social anxiety and help free up the brain to perform better.⁴⁶ When you combine that with the power of affirmations, you get a powerful one-two punch. Affirmations and self-esteem have been a focus of psychological research since the 1980s. As one study found, “Timely affirmations have been shown to improve education, health, and relationship outcomes, with benefits that sometimes persist for months and years.”⁴⁷

How can you leverage affirmations to remind yourself that you are valuable? Try this: List everything that you value in yourself. Take the top three and create a statement (e.g., “Brian is relentless, focused, and arrogant when performing”). This affirmation can be used before performances to prime the performance mind when self-doubt creeps in, or even as a reset mechanism during breaks in action. Try repeating your affirmation to yourself when you wake up in the morning and just before you go to bed at night. Or, on a daily basis, set a timer for five minutes and repeat it to yourself as a mantra.

Finally, don’t be afraid to talk to yourself in the third person when you are performing. Great performers like boxer Floyd Mayweather, Deion Sanders, and LeBron James all do it. Tell yourself, for example, “Brian is going to nail this speech,” or “Nobody can resist Brian’s ideas today,” or “When Brian hits mile thirteen, he’s just going to crush it.” You get the idea. “Brian is a badass”—and so are you!

Power Pose

Amy Cuddy’s TED Talk has been watched over fifty-six million times, making it one of the most popular TED Talks ever presented. Cuddy is the author of the book *Presence*, in which she describes her work on how we can leverage our body language to feel more powerful. Cuddy suggests that just by “power posing”—for example, lifting your arms into a V formation and raising your chin—you can feel more confident, which can impact your ability to perform.⁴⁸ I have had clients power pose in front of a mirror before a big presentation. Others remain conscious of their body language during a game.

Some clap for themselves to prime their performance mind.

What power pose or behavior would work for you?

Highlight Reel

When my professional athletes are struggling to perform, I often advise them to ask their coach for a highlight reel to watch before a game. The highlight reel should show them being powerful, playing with arrogance, and doing what they do best. This works for non-athletes, too. Simply find artifacts that remind you of your past success: an award you can look at, a note that someone wrote to thank you for your performance, a project report or a product sales report that shows how you successfully led your team.

What can you do to develop your own “highlight reel”?



Most of us have been taught to avoid arrogance and to be humble always, but that message is half-baked, neglecting what is needed once we are onstage. If we carry our arrogance into our preparation, though, we won't have what it takes to succeed when the time comes to execute. Remember, the great ones work as if they are not great, but they perform as if they are great—before they are labeled so.

Where will the humility-arrogance cocktail take you?

In the fall of 2011, I walked into the wrestling room at American University not knowing what to expect. As I followed the instructions on a sign—"Please take off your shoes"—I watched the wrestlers drilling on the mats. The head coach, Teague Moore, was in the middle of the room, barking instructions. Even though I was a novice to wrestling, my eyes were drawn to a small wrestler competing with a flare that was different from his teammates. He was half break dancer, half wrestler, and his style was captivating. That wrestler was David Terao.

In high school, Terao had been a two-time wrestling and four-time judo state champion. Terao was redshirting his freshman year at American—sitting out from competition while still being allowed to practice. Coach Moore had big hopes for the unorthodox wrestler. "He could be a national champion one day," Moore told me.

Terao had a spirit and presence about him—he was likeable and cool. He seemed unfazed when he would get down in a match. Being from Hawaii, he always seemed to be on island time—both on and off the mat. In a wrestling culture built on grit, ruggedness, and alpha masculinity, it wasn't just Terao's break-dancing style that made him unique; it was also his personality.

By the time he reached his final season as a fifth-year college senior at American, he had amassed quite a resume, qualifying for the NCAA championships every year and setting a school record for wins in a season (39).⁴⁹ While Terao was consistently successful in his conference, he hadn't quite broken through on the national stage. For wrestlers, becoming an All-American means you finish in the top eight in the national championship—Terao had been one win away from achieving that goal during his sophomore and junior years.

During his first four years, we had worked together on his mindset, and he was intent on making his senior year special. Terao was still on island time,

but now he had a different dedication to his craft and was preparing like an absolute pro, with an extreme work ethic. He had some injuries during the regular season and ended up going 25–5, which helped him become the all-time win leader at American. But it appeared to me that he was putting too much pressure on himself when he was performing, in an effort to make his last year count. Terao finished fifth at the conference championships. It was his worst finish in his collegiate conference career, and it meant he didn't get an automatic bid to the NCAA championship tournament. He was disappointed, but fortunately, because of his past success, he earned a wild-card bid.

Leading up to the NCAA championship, Terao and I met. He looked me in the eye and admitted that he had put too much pressure on himself because he had been so focused on becoming an All-American wrestler. Terao was typically known for wrestling with joy and having an unfair advantage over his opponents because of his unorthodox style. But recently he had been approaching the matches as if they were work.

Now he was about to head to a sold-out Madison Square Garden in New York City, so I asked him to set expectations for the tournament. "I expect to take it all in," he said. "Enjoy it. Remember every moment. Wrestle my way." With one more chance for Terao to break through at nationals, in the world's most famous arena and on his sport's biggest stage, I encouraged him to focus on wrestling with joy.

Seeded fifteenth in his weight class, Terao's first match was against the heavily favored No. 2 seed. Terao later told me that he saw his opponent pre-match, noticed how serious and tense he was, and knew he had the opportunity for an upset. He pulled it off dramatically, leveraging his dance-like style, which turned him into a fan favorite.

The next day Terao upset the No. 10 seed, which punched his ticket to becoming an All-American and gave him an opportunity to wrestle in the semifinal. Terao next wrestled the No. 3 seed, and unfortunately did not move through to the championship. The following day, however, he had another opportunity to continue to make his mark, in a battle for third place. After defeating the No. 9 seed, he was pitted against the number-one-ranked defending national champion.

Terao and the No. 1 seed wrestled back and forth in an intense and close match. When the clock ticked down to zero, Terao had lost that match and

finished fourth in the NCAA championship, yet he walked off the mat to a standing ovation from the crowd. Emotional, with his head held high, Terao waved his hand in salute. He had become the fan favorite of the tournament and had wrestled his way, with the joy that so many in the crowd had come to love. He was unique, passionate, and everything that embodied a champion.

“Even though I lost, I don’t feel bad about my performance,” said Terao. “I gave it everything I had. I put everything on the line against the returning national champ, and I was razor close to coming up with it.”⁵⁰ An emotional Terao had just had the greatest wrestling experience of his life.

Coach Moore was amazed by the experience: “How does a fourth-place finisher get the arena to give him a standing ovation? David wrestles with passion. . . . After what I witnessed today, I’m the happiest coach on the planet.”⁵¹ Terao’s ability to wrestle with enthusiasm, with a strong performance mind, unlocked his potential.

The best performers prepare with a workman-like energy and perspective so they can perform with the playful energy of a child. Simply put, they find the joy in the experience.

Too many of us are stuck in that “work” mindset, trying all the time to be serious, grounded, and intensely focused on delivering what’s expected of us. “Play” doesn’t come into it. I see it with students taking standardized tests and with executives presenting in the board room. Many approach big performances with stress and tension, which can hinder them. In reality, we need to bring our playful selves to work, especially in times of performance.

In my work with athletes, I notice they often behave like Terao, putting unnecessary pressure on themselves to perform up to the expectations of others—fans, family, friends, management. While their job certainly requires them to work, they often struggle to shift their mind to the play mode, to bring positive energy and joy to their performance. They seem to forget that it was their enjoyment of the craft that got them to where they are now; they lose it as the pressure to deliver grows. There is a reason athletes *play* their sport, musicians *play* an instrument, and actors perform in *plays*. Playing is essential for performance—for all of us.

The saying “Work hard, play hard” holds a kernel of truth. The best performers I know take their preparation as seriously as a heart attack but have the perspective that nothing is fatal in performance—what matters is the experience. Play doesn’t necessarily mean they are not focused; it just means

they are in a state of mind that accepts multiple possible outcomes. They bring the work ethic and energy of a professional to their preparation, approaching improvement and growth like it's their daily job. That gives them the right and ability to perform with the joy and energy of a kid.

I have far more clients who struggle with letting go and finding joy in their performance than with putting their daily work “deposits” into the “bank.” It's actually easier for most people to be extremely serious and tense during performance, because this approach seems more socially acceptable. Yet this tension often serves as a block to potential. Perhaps you are like my clients, putting in the work in preparation and then remaining tense when performing, which keeps you from unlocking your best.

Performing as if it's work can cause you to become overly anxious, lose your flow, and sometimes even choke under pressure. Doing the opposite is no better: playing in preparation takes away from your ability to challenge yourself, pay attention to the details, and truly give something the time, deep focus, and deliberate practice it warrants. We need to shift our mind for each situation.

Terao was able to fulfill his potential when he did so. What if he had entered Madison Square Garden focused on what he “had” to do instead of what he “got” to do? What if he had looked at his opportunity as do-or-die? He would have held back, taken fewer risks, had less energy. Instead, the year of preparing with hard work gave him the permission and freedom to perform with play, which brought his performance to a new level.

You are no different—you have higher levels to unlock with work and play. Imagine what your job would look like if you prepared as if it's work, yet performed as if it's play. How can you approach your craft with both work and play, and ensure that you are using each when necessary? Let's dive deeper to find out.

The Myth of “Lazy but Talented”

When I walked into the locker room of a professional team I was working with, one of the star players approached me and asked if I had sent him the book *Relentless* by Tim Grover. He had received it anonymously. I assured him I hadn't sent it, but even to this day I'm not sure he believes me. This athlete

was one of the best in his position in the league, and he was highly driven to be great. When he wasn't playing, his teammates often saw him reading *Relentless*, and he was quick to share the book's lessons.

Tim Grover had trained basketball legends Dwyane Wade, Kobe Bryant, and Michael Jordan, and described all three in the book as "cleaners." According to Grover, the "cooler" wants to be good, and the "closer" wants to be great—but the cleaner wants to be unstoppable.⁵² Like those three celebrated basketball players, the athlete I was working with was focused on being a cleaner. He was serious about his preparation. He hired a trainer to help him with his body, met with me regularly to get his mind in the right space, and constantly tried to find ways to maximize his potential. He could be brash and sometimes struggled to relate to others, but he was obsessed with putting in the work to achieve greatness.

Compare him with Adam, a high school basketball player. Adam was on an absolutely stacked squad with more than ten future Division I college basketball players. He was right on the cusp of breaking into the rotation. Adam was talented, even somewhat gifted athletically. He had an opportunity to help not just his team, but also his efforts in being recruited by colleges. But even as a senior, he hadn't quite earned the trust of his coach. When I walked into the gym one day, a few minutes before the head coach had arrived, I started to understand why. Adam, lacing up his shoes, was wearing a Nike shirt with an interesting motto: "Lazy but Talented."

Questions flooded my mind.

Why would he wear that shirt, especially at practice?

Is that the image Nike really wants to project?

Is that the image Adam wants to project?

That final question, of course, was most important to me in that moment. It was beyond me how Nike could justify going from "Just do it"—or even their "Make it count" video (which has over thirty million views on YouTube)—to "Lazy but talented." Such an approach is clearly a recipe for disaster and lack of fulfillment in the real world. A lack of work ethic has been the downfall of supremely talented people from all walks of life and in every profession. They never come close to reaching their potential because they do not work at their craft like a pro.

But when we're young, we tend to idolize that "cool" attitude of low effort. We envy the kids who don't have to study but always ace the test, or the

superstar athletes who make the team without seeming to work on their game. The truth is, being lazy but talented works pretty well for some people at certain points in their lives. But the real world doesn't reward laziness. It fires it. A high IQ or an athletic body that isn't worked eventually crumbles, and all that's left is what could have been. I have seen it happen to professional basketball players, to high-level programmers, and to gifted salespeople.

Our culture doesn't help. When we talk about people who succeed, instead of their hard work, we often focus on their talent, their brilliance, even their luck. Golf champion Sam Snead, who'd been called "the best natural player ever," told *Golf Digest*, "People always said I had a natural swing. They thought I wasn't a hard worker. But when I was young, I'd play and practice all day, then practice more at night by my car's headlights. My hands bled. Nobody worked harder at golf than I did."⁵³

Go look up the greatest person in your profession—listen to their interviews or read their books. Do they define themselves as lazy but talented, or do they hang their hat on work ethic? As the quote attributed to Michelangelo goes, "If people knew how hard I worked to gain my mastery, it wouldn't seem so wonderful." Kobe Bryant once said the greatest compliment he could get was that he was a "blue-collar" type of player.⁵⁴ Swimmer Katie Ledecky, when asked about why she was so successful at the world championships, said, "I trained for it. I worked hard for it."⁵⁵ Actor Will Smith preaches, at pretty much every opportunity, hard work over talent.⁵⁶

Being lazy but talented will keep you from fulfilling your potential, achieving your personal greatness, and creating sustained success.

complacency is the enemy of success

Perhaps the best-known research on the value of serious work in preparation comes from Anders Ericsson's findings on deliberate practice, which Malcolm Gladwell highlights in his book *Outliers*. Ericsson spent decades studying what makes an expert an expert. He found that to achieve true mastery, experts put in, on average, 10,000 hours of deliberate hard work. As observers of experts, we are often in awe of their ability to play and perform in a way that seems almost effortless. But the performance is the final product—what came before the play is almost always years of hard work in preparation.⁵⁷

As the saying goes—whether you're an ancient Greek poet or a Navy

SEAL—"We don't rise to the level of our expectations; we fall to the level of our training."

Certainly, hard work alone doesn't beget success. Environment, support, natural affinity, and talent may all play a role. But focusing on work in preparation gives you a better opportunity for success. According to an article in *Harvard Business Review*, University of Chicago professor of education Benjamin Bloom attempted to identify what contributed to talent development in children, by examining the lives of "120 elite performers who had won international competitions or awards in fields ranging from music and the arts to mathematics and neurology." In his book *Developing Talent in Young People*, Bloom reveals that he couldn't find any common inherent attributes that might have predicted how successful the children would become, but he did discover something crucial. "All the superb performers he investigated had practiced intensively, had studied with devoted teachers, and had been supported enthusiastically by their families throughout their developing years," the article states. "Consistently and overwhelmingly, the evidence showed that experts are always made, not born."⁵⁸

Perhaps no athlete in history backs up Bloom's findings more than Jerry Rice. In a vote conducted by the NFL Network in 2010, Rice—the son of a bricklayer—was ranked as the best football player ever, and was nicknamed the GOAT.⁵⁹ Rice embodies the importance of hard work (and humility) as much as any athlete described in this book. Rice attended a Division I-AA college after graduating high school. Then, upon graduating college, he ran a woeful 40-yard dash time. Heck, Rich Eisen, a forty-seven-year-old TV personality for the NFL Network, has achieved similar times in charity runs—while wearing a suit. Yet Rice went on to play twenty-two seasons in the NFL; made thirteen Pro Bowls; and set the record for receptions, yards, and touchdowns for a wide receiver.

Rice's work ethic and training are legendary. As a rookie, Rice ran a two-and-a-half-mile hill in California over and over.⁶⁰ He would time himself, working to break his previous record. As Rice gained accolades and success, word about his training got out in the NFL, and other great athletes—Barry Sanders, Eddie George, Barry Bonds—joined him on "the hill" and on other workouts in the off-season. The message was clear: if you trained with Rice, you'd push yourself to fulfill your potential. Rice would show up even before the rookies reported to training camp in the off-season. He would attend

special-teams meetings even though he wasn't on special teams. Rice knew that a serious work ethic in preparation was the ideal way to bring out his best, and it inspired his teammates to put in their best. He believed complacency was the enemy of success.

When Rice was inducted into the Hall of Fame, he talked about the work ethic his parents had instilled in him from a young age. Rice became emotional as he reflected on all the work he had put in. But it was his teammate, former quarterback Steve Young, who really captured the essence of Rice when he talked about how Jerry had outworked even the work-ethic guys—the players who lacked Rice's gifts and had to leverage their willingness to give 110 percent to make it in the NFL.⁶¹

Then Young told a story about when the 49ers won the Super Bowl in 1995. After an amazing season, Rice had played an amazing final game, catching ten passes for 149 yards and three touchdowns, even with a separated shoulder. The day after the celebrations were over, Young wandered over to the deserted 49ers training facility to clean out his locker. Leaving the empty locker room, he looked out on the field to see Jerry Rice running wind sprints.⁶² While others were resting on their laurels, Rice was back in the lab.

Rice's excessive, sometimes unorthodox preparation is what helped him have an unorthodox career. He created his expertise, and with the same level of dedication in preparation, you can create the opportunity to master your craft.

Keep Doing What You Could, Not Just What You Should

The term *grit* has become a buzzword. We hear it from performers, from educators, and in organizational cultures everywhere. Being gritty has become vogue. The reason for the buzz is largely due to Angela Duckworth, who has become the leading expert on the concept. She defines *grit* as a combination of passion and perseverance for long-term goals. As she explains in her best-selling book, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, when describing the most successful people in areas as diverse as the military and spelling bees, "They were the opposite of complacent. And yet, in a very real sense, they were satisfied being unsatisfied. Each was chasing something of unparalleled interest and importance, and it was the chase—as much as the capture—that was gratifying. Even if some of the things they had to do were boring, or

frustrating, or even painful, they wouldn't dream of giving up. Their passion was enduring.”⁶³ Gritty preparers know why they are doing what they are doing, and they leverage their perseverance to overcome the obstacles in the way.

I worked with an All-American college athlete who once told me his philosophy: “Do what you could, not what you should.” A lazy but talented athlete might just do what they should—what their coaches tell them to do. Just doing what you should creates space for excuses. People who just do what they should probably don't have the passion to persevere; they don't have the grit to keep going when things get tough. Just doing what you should leads to blending in with the rest of the pack, and rarely to standing out as a high-level performer. Doing what you could, on the other hand, supports maximum effort and provides the best opportunity for success for you and your team.

Look at the greatest performers in your profession, and you will find that they add the “ERs,” or “extra reps.” The great ones don't want to just be strong; they want to be strongER. They don't want to be fast; they want to be fastER. They don't want to be smart; they want to be smartER. And they are willing to persevere and do whatever they can possibly do to make that happen, all in pursuit of their bigger goal.

Can you name a legendary performer who has not added the ERs to his or her journey? Remember, the greatest performers have a workman-like mindset when it comes to preparation. They are gritty in their preparation, doing everything they could rather than just what they should.

The Danger of Being Too Serious

Once, during a state championship match, I walked with an elite high school golfer who was casually talking with her opponents in between shots. Most of the time, they were jovial in their conversation. Later, I heard some college coaches chastising her for a “lack of focus.” What they didn't know is that I had talked with her about focusing on joy and playfulness between shots, as part of her process. As she walked toward her golf ball, she was intentionally finding enjoyment in the round and the day.

If you have ever played golf, you have probably tried to swing a club when your body is tight and you're overly focused on the mechanics of your swing.

After all, the sport literally has hazards on the course designed to cause stress. Swinging with tension typically doesn't lead to good results, though. When we direct our focus to the work of delivering a performance rather than the desired experience of performing, we aren't freeing our performance mind. We aren't leveraging the energy of play.

This dynamic isn't limited to golf, of course. Maybe your experience includes presenting to an audience or sharing ideas in an important meeting—situations where you needed your performance-oriented, playful mind to focus on the moment. If you can't let go of the serious, work-oriented perspective required during preparation, you might miss some key opportunities. When we lack the play perspective, we limit our capacity to perform.

By many measures, the education system in Norway is one of the best in the world. The school day is an hour shorter; no grades are given in the elementary school years; and the kids get two hours of unstructured outdoor play every day, as opposed to the thirty minutes they get in America. As our kids become more specialized, more professionalized at a younger age, child development experts have touted Norwegian schools and called for prescriptions for play. Why? Play has serious benefits—and they don't stop once we turn thirteen or eighteen or thirty-five. In fact, researchers like Stuart Brown, Lynn Barnett, and others have shown that for adults, play in practice and in perspective can dramatically improve our ability to perform. Play offers specific cognitive benefits such as the following:

- Much greater ability to cope with stress (or lower perceived stress in the same difficult circumstances)⁶⁴
- Faster learning, greater productivity, and better job satisfaction⁶⁵
- Improved bonding and emotional connection with others⁶⁶

Focusing on play in the workforce may seem counterintuitive, but according to the Association for Psychological Science, “play at work is linked with less fatigue, boredom, stress, and burnout in individual workers. . . . Studies show that when a participant receives a task that is presented playfully, they are more involved and spend more time on the task.” Play has a positive impact on teams as well, including “increased trust, bonding and social interaction, [a] sense of solidarity, and a decreased sense of hierarchy.” Eventually the entire organization benefits, with a friendlier culture, higher

levels of commitment, and better decision-making and creativity.⁶⁷

Head coach Andy Enfield of Florida Gulf Coast University (now the head coach at University of Southern California) wanted all this and more for his team as they made a Cinderella run in the 2013 NCAA Tournament. They had beat No. 2 seed Georgetown and had become the first No. 15 seed to make it to the Sweet 16. Coach Enfield, who became the darling of the tournament, shared the performance thinking he was trying to cultivate. “None of our players have been to the NCAA Tournament[,] so we’ll try to get them ready mentally,” he wrote, “but when we get there, I want them to have fun and enjoy the experience whether we win or lose.”⁶⁸ Time on the team bus, activities in warmups, and anything else that had to do with performance involved a playfulness, a sense of fun. As one reporter described it, “Florida Gulf Coast, the free-wheeling No. 15 seed . . . took the court against [the University of] Florida as if this were a pickup game near the beach in Fort Myers.” He called out their “pressure-free players” and “unbridled enthusiasm.”⁶⁹ Coach Enfield had helped them put in the work mentally so they could play once they were performing.

The greatest performers find artistry, creativity, and flow in the challenges of performance. To do so, they employ work-oriented energy during the grind of preparation—and then, when the lights are on, they play with upbeat energy and joy. For many, that shift can be the difference between success and failure.

Find the Joyful Kid Inside You

Ingrid Fetell Lee has made studying joy her life’s work. As a designer, she focuses on building and finding joy in our environments. In her TED Talk, she defines joy as “an intense momentary experience of positive emotion, one that makes us smile and laugh and feel like we want to jump up and down. . . . That feeling of wanting to jump up and down is one of the ways that scientists measure joy.”⁷⁰

Joy actually creates positive physical energy. Moments of joy when performing are often what help performers get over past failures and cast off boulders of stress. According to research, joy increases our dopamine levels, which increases activity in the brain associated with “high-level cognition”—memory, attention, creativity, and motivation.⁷¹ What helps create joy? Being

playful. As play researcher and author Peter Gray points out, “The predominant emotions of play are interest and joy.”⁷²

Whatever performing means in your life and work, how often do you feel like jumping up and down while doing it? What do you look like when you are playing with joy? Are you full of energy and optimism? Does the performance seem easier?

If play creates joy, then what kills it? When performers take their craft too seriously. If you want to prime your mind for play and joy, embrace the things that bring your craft to life for you. Michael Jordan admitted that he liked to be a “prankster” before games and used to emphasize that he “played” basketball.⁷³ Lee found that we all respond with joy to similar tangibles in our environment: bright colors, round things, googly eyes, bubbles. And Roy Campanella, Hall of Fame baseball player, once said, “You gotta be a man to play baseball for a living, but you gotta have a lot of little boy in you, too.”⁷⁴ He was talking about the joy of play that came easy to us as kids, and that we have to practice as adults.

We all have a joyful, playful kid in us. How can you coax your inner child out to play for your next performance?

Have some fun!

Barry Trotz, who helped lead the Washington Capitals to their first ever Stanley Cup Championship in 2018, knew that play and optimism would be the key to their success. His team, which had spent years delivering underwhelming performances in the playoffs, needed to play with joy if they were going to win it all. Without a play perspective and joyful energy, they would lack the resilience, connectivity, and creativity needed. Despite the pressure, his last words before the Capitals took the ice in the finals were not to give it everything they had, but to have some fun.⁷⁵ What does fun look like? Perhaps it’s as simple as a smile.

Research has shown that intentionally smiling can actually have a positive impact on a runner’s performance. Noel Brick and Richard Metcalfe describe their surprising findings: “Participants were most economical (they used less energy) while smiling. Remarkably, participants were 2.8 percent more economical when smiling than frowning, and 2.2 percent more economical in comparison with the normal thoughts condition. These reductions would be

enough to expect a meaningful improvement in performance in race conditions.”⁷⁶ Others have found that even forcing a smile can reduce stress,⁷⁷ and that just saying aloud, “I feel excited,” can help us reframe our thinking from the negative to the positive.⁷⁸

Regardless of the approach we take, what’s important is that we focus on the enjoyable experience of our performance rather than the work of it. If we shift consciously and correctly, and if we have already done the hard work of preparation that frees us to play in performance, the energy we bring to the performance will be more optimistic and will carry us further.

Work and Play “Ethic”

When I was in graduate school, I was fortunate to get an internship at University High School in San Francisco, where I was working with the boys’ basketball team. The team was led by Coach Randal Bessolo, who had a successful career in real estate before retiring to follow his passion of coaching basketball. Bessolo was incredible. He ran a system that was ahead of its time, encouraging his players to focus on shooting three-pointers and layups—a concept that has since been adopted by most professional basketball teams. He was known for his “Randyisms.” One of his favorites was to tell his kids before game time, in the locker room, “This is the most important game of the season”—regardless of whom they were playing. Another line he used right before the kids were about to head onto the court was, “Play with joy.” That one stuck with me, and more important, it stuck with his players. That year, they played with joy all the way to the state finals, falling just short in the championship game.

“Play with joy” is a Randyism that I have passed along to my clients. Yet what many didn’t see about Bessolo and his basketball team was the countless hours of preparation that went into each game; the hours and hours spent developing a consistent three-point shot, building physical fitness in order to press their opponents throughout all four quarters, and attending to all the little details that create a successful team. Bessolo and his players absolutely played with joy; they had put in the work during preparation to earn that freedom on the court.

Hard, gritty work needs to be cherished during preparation. When we

come to the performance feeling like we've done everything we could to prepare, it frees us up to enjoy the performance. If we are all work and no play, we will never be able to maximize our potential. If we don't make time for play, we won't be able to see the true results of all our hard work.

In the corporate world, we have long praised employees' work ethic as a foundation for success. To this day, I have never met a successful person who lacks that guiding set of principles that shaped their conduct. Yet if we want to bring out our best, we have to actively cultivate our "play ethic." Great organizations know the power of the mantra "Work hard, play hard." They leverage each when it is needed, and build in the ability to shift.

How are you bringing a play ethic to your job? Are you finding the joy and amusement you need when it's time to perform? When the stakes are raised, do you have the enthusiasm of a child? Are you using your joy to play well with others? The work ethic needed in preparation can drive the play ethic needed in performance. When we work hard to learn, grow, and improve, it creates clarity and freedom when the time comes for our mind to surrender to the moment and simply play. After all, that's what the game of life is calling for, and that's what our society is begging for in the midst of our often intense and stressful world. The more pressure-packed the situation, the more relaxed we need to be.

Exercise Section

Working on Work and Play

As you think about how to work in preparation and play in performance, it's important to note that both will require, well, work. You may have already developed patterns and processes that go against this approach, so give yourself some space and time to build new patterns. Try the following exercises to practice the two minds.

Showing Up for Work

Make a list of five adjectives that describe how you want to show up when working in preparation. These words should reflect who you are, but they are more about what you are going to do and how you will show up when things

are difficult or challenging. I’ve seen clients use words like driven, gritty, or determined.

The Army has a phrase, “Embrace the suck,” which speaks to the importance of doing things that are not always glamorous. Soldiers know that embracing the suck is code for putting in the hard work now so you can be prepared to act when your life is on the line. In creating your list of words, focus on the elements of your preparation that require a workman-like mind and how you need to show up to embrace it.

Commitment Devices

When working on hard things, our commitment can waver. “Commitment devices” provide a simple and succinct way to hold you accountable to the outcomes you want. Simply create a list of your commitments, one by one, along with the corresponding consequences for not fulfilling them.

What do you need to commit to while working in preparation? What consequences can you put into place to ensure you honor those commitments?

COMMITMENT	CONSEQUENCE FOR NOT FULFILLING IT

Walk the Runway

Ever watch supermodels walk the runway? They have an intensity and a swagger to them, and the best of the best find a way to make that experience fun. Supermodel Tyra Banks often says, “Every hallway is a runway.” Banks also is famous for coining the term *smize* when she was the host on the TV show *America’s Next Top Model*, to describe the ability some models have to smile with their eyes. Banks knew her smile is part of how she makes a living; it’s part of her performance. If you have ever seen Banks walk the runway, you also know she likes to wink and show some personality—essentially, to play. Like many performers, Banks knows that when she is playing in performance, she’s at her best. And while she is an absolute worker in preparation, her ability to perform exceptionally is what makes her an elite figure in her industry.

So how do we practice the performance mind of play? Walk the runway like Tyra Banks.

The next time you are in a hallway, practice walking with joy, with play. Take the time to walk the runway as if you are a supermodel. Dance while you’re shopping the aisles at the grocery store, like my writing coach, Lari Bishop, to make the experience more enjoyable. It may be silly, but that’s the point. We are tapping into your playful performance mind.

Whatever you do to tap into your playfulness, pay attention to the emotion you feel while doing it. What do you feel? Where do you feel it? How can you create this feeling before and during your performance?

Finding Joy

If you are struggling to bring joy to your job, perhaps think about how you can alter your environment. A simple change in color can drastically impact mood. For example, the color red has been associated with high energy and power, and orange is associated with warmth and joy.⁷⁹ Can you be intentional about the colors you have in your office, boardroom, or locker room? Your choices can prime your mind for play. Remember Ingrid Fetell Lee’s research into how we can design our environments for greater joy—check out her TED Talk, and be inspired.

Another great way to increase joy is to journal or read about joy. The research on the impact of gratitude journaling on our happiness is

overwhelming. I worked with a basketball player who used to read an encouraging letter from his grandfather before every game. Writing and reading about joy can often overwhelm the stress of a big event. It's very hard to be grateful and stressed at the same time. When we tap into gratitude, we tap into joy, which allows us to tap into our play mind for performance.

Belly and Heart

The science of meditation has become robust over the past couple of decades. This book offers different forms of meditation, but one of my favorite exercises involves the head and the heart. Here's how it works. (Seriously—work on this.)

With your eyes closed, sit quietly in a chair with your feet on the ground and place your hand on your stomach. Take a deep breath in through your nose, and notice your belly expand and your hand move with it. Next, exhale out through your mouth and really emphasize the exhale, like you are blowing out birthday candles. As you exhale, the belly should contract and your hand should move with it. Continue these breaths at a pace and tempo that works for you, with a greater emphasis on the exhale. Just focus on your breath. Anytime you get a thought, just shift your attention back to your breath.

After about a minute, shift your hand from your belly to your heart. As you continue your breath, think of the most joyful moment of your life. Imagine it as vividly as possible. Sit with that memory for about a minute and then open your eyes.

Upon opening your eyes, take an inventory of your body and mind—how you feel, your thoughts.

This exercise can give you perspective on what's important in life. It also teaches you how to quiet your mind and then intentionally fill your mind with thoughts and feelings that are in alignment with the joyful play mind. Try using this exercise before a performance.



The average person spends approximately thirteen years and two months of his or her life at work.⁸⁰ How we show up and what we do while we are there—that's up to us. Put in the necessary hard work during preparation so you can tap into it and perform with play in mind. Rely on both—your work mind

and your play mind—to bring out your best and to increase the fulfillment you experience.

And remember, when things don't work out in performance (it happens to all of us sometimes!), go back to your work so you can be better prepared for next time. Then, when you get that next opportunity, play your heart out.

Love 'em or hate 'em, no team in professional sports over the past twenty years has been as dominant as the New England Patriots. I couldn't write this book and leave them out. Led by Bill Belichick, arguably the best head coach of all time, and Tom Brady (now with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers), probably the best NFL quarterback of all time, this team is one of the most studied for its leadership, culture, and performance. Brady and Belichick have built a culture around a simple phrase: "Do your job." It is an ethos that can be heard echoed on the sidelines, in the film room, on the practice field, and on game day. But of course, they don't mean just do your job—they mean do it to the absolute best of your ability, and to the exacting standards they have established through training. They want you to do your job perfectly.

Brady's perfectionistic tendencies are well known on the team. Jim Miller, who was Brady's backup in 2004, talked about the experience of working under him:

It had to be later in the year, Week 14 or whatever, [when] he felt his footwork was getting sloppy. He said, "Jim, get on me all week about my footwork. Watch my feet today, Jim. Let's really work on our footwork today, Jim, and get it right, because it's gotta be perfect." And I did. . . . He's extremely demanding and hard on himself to begin with, so all the hard coaching doesn't bother Tom.⁸¹

Perhaps no example of the Patriot Way is more telling, though, than cornerback Malcolm Butler's shocking, legendary interception that sealed the Patriots' Super Bowl victory over the Seattle Seahawks in 2015. If you dissect what happened leading up to that play, it's a clinic in the preparation-versus-performance mind at work and the shift that needs to take place. Let's take a

look.

During the week leading up to that Super Bowl, the Patriots practiced their goal-line package. Butler, despite being inactive for four games that season and seeing action in only eight games, was still preparing as if he would be on the field when it mattered most. “I was at practice, and the scout team ran the same exact play, and I got beat on it at practice because I gave ground,” he explained. “Bill Belichick, he came and said to me, ‘Malcolm, you’ve gotta be on that.’”⁸² The Patriots believe that practice is the opportunity to break things down, to be perfectionistic about the “little things.” Those little things determine the ability of players to do their job with perfection. This is slightly different than Tom Coughlin’s approach, which we talked about earlier, but it is a good example of how a coach can mesh the preparation and performance mind in practice.

After a rocky first half, the Patriots decided to bench cornerback Kyle Arrington and replace him with Butler; the same player who had defended only four passes over the course of a season was now expected to do his job on the biggest stage in sports. Butler’s job was to cover Jermaine Kearse, whom Arrington had struggled to cover. The Seahawks went right after Butler, but he seemed up to the challenge—making a few huge plays. Then, with about one minute left in the game, the Seahawks threw the ball to Kearse near the sideline. Butler leapt up and tipped the ball—an incredible play—but it miraculously landed in Kearse’s lap as he lay on the ground near the five-yard line.

The cameras were on Butler as he went to the sideline, frustrated and angry with himself. “My teammates tried to cheer me up,” he later told reporters. “They said I made a great play. Just landed in his hands. When I got back out there, I just had to make a play.”⁸³

The Seahawks ran another play and got to the one-yard line. With the clock ticking down on the Patriots’ chances, Butler was called back onto the field for a new formation: the Seahawks had three wide receivers in the game, and for the first time all season, the Patriots put three cornerbacks in a goal-line situation. But this was also the scenario Belichick had been teaching Butler how to defend just days earlier. In a video from that practice, he explains that Butler has to come over the top of the receiver to “jump the route” rather than sit back and wait to see what will transpire.⁸⁴

As Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson hiked the ball, Butler sprinted

like a speeding bullet and secured the first interception of his career. The timing couldn't have been better; it secured the Super Bowl win for the Patriots. After the game, Butler said, "Eyes. Eyes tell everything. I [saw] Wilson looking over there and trying to keep his head still, just look over there like this," Butler said, shifting his eyes to indicate his meaning.⁸⁵

Remember, it's the little things.

The Patriots have played in the Super Bowl far more than any other team in the history of football because they demand the very best of themselves, and because the coaches instill that mentality in the players through the team culture. They are perfectionistic in their preparation, with high expectations and exacting standards during training. This level of excellence in their preparation frees them to be adaptable in their performance. They can let go of their expectations for perfection and control, so when things don't go as planned—when a play falls apart, when the opponent has them backed into a corner—instead of being rigid and overly focused on the details of what went wrong, they can adjust and be flexible in how they respond.

If you can't let go of the expectation for perfection during the performance, the unexpected will throw you. To really deliver, you have to be perfectionistic during your preparation, but you can't control your environment. When the unexpected happens, great teams and great performers respond rather than simply react.

My friend Alan Stein Jr., one of the most esteemed strength and conditioning coaches in basketball for many years, is now a successful keynote speaker and author of the book *Raise Your Game*. An important saying of his is plastered on the wall of the Penn State Football Training Center: "Are the habits you have today on par with the dreams you have for tomorrow?" Having a dream is easy; building perfectionistic habits that move you toward that dream is hard. But letting go of that perfection when you need to in performance can be equally hard.

Too many performers are unwilling to prepare for the demands of achieving the highest standard of excellence, and yet they often create too high of a standard for themselves when performing. I have seen it with salespeople who don't take the time to know the ins and outs of a potential client—and then, on a sales call, fold as soon as they hear the word *no*. I have seen it with real estate investors who don't look at every aspect of a deal prior to closing—and then expect a property to perform perfectly once they own it.

Perfectionistic thinking and expectations can cripple your performance.

The most successful people typically expect a level of perfection in preparation, but once they are between the lines, they let go of that expectation for a certain outcome. Instead, they focus on expectations for the experience or process so they can adapt to what is happening in the moment. During performance, perfectionistic chatter gets in the way of our ability to be nimble and adjust to the world around us. That is why workplaces today train their employees to be agile; companies have to give themselves room to breathe and the flexibility to adapt to an ever-changing environment.

During the first Monday Night Football game of the 2019 season—between the Houston Texans and the New Orleans Saints—ESPN debuted a neon yellow “down and distance” image in the bottom right corner of the screen. Fans on Twitter started complaining about the image, and by halftime Bill Hofheimer, senior director of communications for ESPN, tweeted, “Our ESPN production team is aware of the feedback on the #MNF down and distance graphic. We have called an audible and adjusted for the second half of #HOUvsNO and for the #DENvsOAK game to follow. New look pictured here.”⁸⁶ ESPN must have put a lot of energy, work, and research into the debut of that new image and screen layout, but rather than holding fast to their idea of the perfect production, they acknowledged the mistake, changed it, and moved forward.

As we have come to understand the importance of flexibility and agility in the modern world, perfectionism has come under attack. The message is that perfectionism is for Type A control freaks. But that message can lead to a lack of attention to detail that leaves us ill-prepared for the rigors of a performance. Relentlessly striving for perfection while preparing—with the understanding that the mark is always moving—will allow you to be adaptable to anything when performing, just as ESPN was.

Sure, when we bring perfectionism into performance, it has the ability to paralyze. But adaptable people who don’t spend time perfecting their preparation will also limit their potential. It is up to you to demand the highest standard of excellence for yourself so you can adjust to the unknown conditions of a performance.

How can you perfect your preparation? How can you practice being adaptable so you can turn on a dime when it’s time to perform? Start by understanding the mindsets of this shift.

How Perfection Helps

It's 2013, and Beyoncé Knowles is preparing for her performance at the Super Bowl halftime show. For Beyoncé, this opportunity is a lifelong dream. In an interview with CBS, she gave incredible insight into her preparation—an approach similar to that of the greatest performers in any other industry. Her director Hamish Hamilton said, “She can be a very benevolent dictator. She also can be a wonderful collaborator. . . . She has such ambition to be perfect and to be the best that you just get swept along with that.”

Beyoncé responded, “I can’t help it. I definitely collaborate and I respect people that I work with, but I dreamt the performance before it happened.”⁸⁷ The rest of her team talked about how much she cares about every moment of the performance. Beyoncé said, “I really strive to keep perfecting, getting better, and knowing that I always have room to grow.”⁸⁸ Perfectionism, humility, and work ethic are interdependent.

In an interview on Lewis Howes’s podcast, *School of Greatness*, Kobe Bryant explained that Beyoncé’s perfectionistic preparation mirrored his own. He said, “After a performance, she’s immediately on her laptop, rewatching the performance, seeing how to do things better—‘What could we have done differently?’ It’s an obsessiveness that comes along with it. You want things to be as perfect as they can be, understanding that nothing is ever perfect.”⁸⁹

Decades before that 2013 Super Bowl, legendary football coach Vince Lombardi famously said something similar to his team: “Gentleman, we are going to relentlessly chase perfection, knowing full well we won’t catch it because nothing is perfect. But we are going to relentlessly chase it, because in the process we will catch excellence.”⁹⁰ As Beyoncé took the stage at halftime that night, a recording of Lombardi’s powerful speech played in the background. His words of wisdom, she says, helped her feel like a “warrior” onstage.⁹¹

You can find a focus on perfectionism in all forms of performance. Legendary writer and martial arts practitioner Kenji Tokitsu said that from the earliest eras, “[m]artial arts were characterized by striving for perfection.”⁹² British prime minister Winston Churchill would practice his speeches in front of a mirror until he knew them cold and was satisfied with his delivery.⁹³ Tennis greats Chris Evert and Serena Williams both labeled themselves “perfectionists.” Emmy Rossum, star of the hit TV show *Shameless*, points out,

“It’s not about control but perfectionism—my biggest vice and one of my biggest assets.”⁹⁴

What exactly do these high achievers mean by “perfection”? They mean that no stone is left unturned as they work again and again on their craft. Their attention to detail goes beyond what outsiders believe is enough; they comb (and recomb) their performances for ways to improve. They are never complacent, always striving to become more. Many performers will use the word *obsessed*. When you hear that phrase, you know the performer is perfectionistic in his or her approach to preparation. Whereas work ethic is about energy and perspective, perfectionism is about where we direct our attention—to each small detail that might make a difference when we’re in the spotlight.

Perfectionism has been a hot topic of research for decades. Robert Slaney and his colleagues, who developed the Almost Perfect Scale, found that more resilient perfectionists have high standards and an affinity for order.⁹⁵ And psychologists Paul Hewitt and Gordon Flett developed their multidimensional perfectionism scale based on three different aspects of perfectionism, depending on where the focus lies: self-oriented, other-oriented, or socially prescribed. They found that self-oriented perfectionists are the ones who set the most exacting standards and are self-motivated.⁹⁶

High standards lead to other positive traits. According to one article, Hewitt and Flett’s research showed that self-oriented perfectionists “set high standards for themselves in their lives and careers, but are able to go after their goals. High self-oriented perfectionism is generally associated with the most ‘adaptive’ traits correlated with greater productivity and success, including resourcefulness and assertiveness.” In fact, these driven individuals “show higher rates of positive emotion.”⁹⁷ In a *Harvard Business Review* article, a group of researchers shared their findings that “perfectionists are more motivated on the job, work longer hours, and can be more engaged at work.”⁹⁸ They found that excellence-seeking perfectionists tend to hold others to high standards, too, so organizational cultures can benefit when a contributor raises the bar for the entire team.

When Perfectionism Runs Amok

I believe it’s possible to operate with a healthy level of perfectionism. I’ve seen

it in action. I am not a psychologist, and I know some psychologists would disagree with me. But a good number of psychologists do see the potential benefits of perfectionism playing out in the real world.

Regardless, we can't talk about perfectionism without talking about the downsides and dangers. Perfectionism's bad reputation is not unwarranted. I have seen it cripple performers, and perhaps it has held you back at times too. Psychologists use the term *adaptive*—that's right, *adaptive*—when discussing whether people who have perfectionistic tendencies can adjust their thinking and behavior to make it more constructive depending on the situation. But when perfectionists are “maladaptive,” they tend to have higher rates of depression, anxiety, burnout, stress, and even suicide.⁹⁹ Perfectionism has to be monitored and handled with care; it has to be balanced so it doesn't backfire.

In Hewitt and Flett's language, when perfection is socially prescribed (based on concerns that others will reject us) or other-oriented (when we hold others to high standards and are critical and judgmental of them), it can be destructive to us personally and to our teams.¹⁰⁰ In their study, Slaney and the other creators of the Almost Perfect Scale identified three elements of perfectionism: high standards; orderliness; and the “discrepancy factor,” or the gap between a perfectionist's standards and level of performance satisfaction. That discrepancy factor is important. If we never believe that we are meeting our own high standards—if we cannot honestly assess how realistic our standards are and how effectively we are making progress toward them—we will feel shame and low self-esteem.¹⁰¹

Yes, perfectionism can help us deliver at the top of our potential. Overblown into self-criticism, doubt, and anxiety, however, it can keep us from happiness, fulfillment, and contentment. The effects can even become physical. In an article in the *New York Times*, psychiatrist Richard Davidson, founder and director of the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, points out, “Self-criticism can take a toll on our minds and bodies. . . . It can lead to ruminative thoughts that interfere with our productivity, and it can impact our bodies by stimulating inflammatory mechanisms that lead to chronic illness and accelerate aging.”¹⁰²

When the lights came up on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, we met a warm, friendly, and accepting teacher. Fred Rogers leveraged encouragement whether he was performing on camera, interacting with the other actors, or fighting for public TV in front of US senators. Rogers would end every

episode with his famous words: “I like you just the way you are.”

While he was much loved and admired, Rogers had an overactive inner critic. “Despite the adoration and accolades, Rogers struggled with feelings of self-doubt throughout his career,” writes journalist Robert Ito, who uncovered a tortured memo Rogers wrote after taking a three-year break:

Am I kidding myself that I’m able to write a script again? Am I really just whistling Dixie? I wonder. . . . Why can’t I trust myself.

Documentarian Morgan Neville describes Rogers’ struggles in real terms: “If you look at the old scripts, there are pages and pages of notes, just tons of notations, on every single episode.”¹⁰³

Even the most positive-seeming elite performers have moments where destructive perfectionism creeps in.

Saying “I suck” or “I am awful” is not how we work toward perfection. It’s shaming, and shame impedes our ability to grow, our ability to learn. Healthy, self-oriented, adaptable perfectionism, on the other hand, is focused on the specific ways you can improve and on skillful judgment of the truth. And the truth is, perfection is a great goal to help us prepare with excellence—but it will always be unattainable.

As you use perfectionism in preparation, it’s important that you also blend it with some of the other preparation shifts mentioned in this book. Perfectionism can make or break you, so get clarity about how you can use it. Build self-awareness of the impact it has in your life, and find people who can check you when it runs amok.

Perfectionism Requires Discipline—and Encourages It

I once worked with an NBA player who told me during our first meeting that he is a perfectionist. He trained his body hard in the off-season to prepare it for a grueling season. He thought carefully about the food he ate to make sure he was fueling himself correctly. He would work on his three-point shot over and over and over again until his form was *just right*. He was successful at the highest level *because* of his perfectionistic preparation, not in spite of it. It helped him develop the skills and the physical ability to compete on a nightly basis with just about any pro basketball player. Perfectionism requires

discipline, and without discipline, we don't develop.

The difference between success and failure in pro sports is about percentage points. Fighting for those percentage points is difficult. When you're exhausted after a workout, it's much easier to walk away without stretching, but stretching could be the difference between an injury and a great game. In business, it's much easier not to meet with your team every week to set goals and solve problems, but that weekly meeting could be the difference between a productive and an unproductive week, or between hitting quarterly goals and missing those goals.

I'll be honest: perfect preparation is not one of my strengths. Instead, it's something I have to work at daily—I have to be disciplined. In high school, I hated proofreading my papers and often got lower grades because they were sloppy. But senior year was the first time I really understood how this tendency limited me.

I decided to run for vice president of the student council, and I was up against stiff competition. When I ran for class president in middle school, my dad had a heavy hand in crafting my speech, and I practiced it over and over again. This allowed me to adapt the speech a bit during the actual delivery to add my own flair. As a high school senior, things went a bit differently. I wrote my speech without too much effort and practiced it a few times. The faculty advisor told us we had to stick to the approved speech we turned in. But when I got onstage, I heard my competition speak and knew that the speech I had written was not up to snuff. I tried to adapt, explaining why I was a better choice than everyone onstage rather than reading my speech. But I could tell the approach didn't land. I wasn't prepared enough to be adaptable. My good friend Michael Birns, who today is an elite orthopedic surgeon and has always been one of the funniest people I have ever met, delivered a hell of a speech and won. He deserved it. Michael always approached things with perfectionistic preparation and adaptable performance. I didn't take the time to perfect my preparation, and adaptability without a perfectionistic foundation offers limited results.

When you feel your discipline slipping, remind yourself that healthy perfectionism isn't necessary for mediocrity, or even for being good—but if you want to be great, you have to tap into it in preparation.

Bend to Avoid Breaking

After twenty years with the Los Angeles Lakers, Kobe Bryant had a countermove for any in-game challenge. He knew how to adapt to the flow of the game and find the crevices on the court that he needed to score the ball. Kobe was a master problem solver and looked at every game as an opportunity to paint a masterpiece. He studied other industries—music, writing, acting—to learn how to get into character as a performer. But he also was obsessed with precisely perfect preparation. Perfecting what he called his “pre-work” allowed him to understand all the possibilities on the court so he could make decisions instantly while in a game. He knew that to become a champion, he needed obsessive attention to detail. That perfectionistic mindset gave him an edge at performance time.

Make no mistake: Kobe’s work ethic was legendary. But what made Kobe truly special was his ability to shift from perfectionism in preparation to adaptability when performing. I spoke to a former teammate of his, Laron Profit, to get a sense of what Kobe was like when he was performing. Laron told me this story.

The Lakers were playing the Seattle Supersonics, and at halftime, Kobe had only shot six for nineteen. Laron, a positive and upbeat guy, was trying to be a good teammate when he went up to Kobe and said, “Hey, man. It’s going to be all right; you’re going to get it going. We trust you.”

Kobe looked at Laron and said, “I am not worried. I work too hard for the ball not to go in.”¹⁰⁴ Kobe didn’t worry; he wasn’t trying to be perfect. And in the second half, he ended up with forty-plus points. Kobe knew that the performance is not about perfection. If he had worried about making “perfect” happen, he would have been too tense and distracted to come back the way he did in the second half of that game.

Let’s compare that to the approach of the NBA player who put all the work in during preparation to become an All-Star, crushing it on- and off-season. Unfortunately, once that player was between the lines, he struggled to shift out of the perfection mind and adapt to whatever each game brought. When he started to miss shots in a game, he would become passive. When his botched pass became a turnover, he became hesitant. When he got beat on defense, he became complacent. The perfectionistic approach offered the tools he needed to be successful at the highest level of his craft, but his lack of

adaptability in performance held him back from reaching his full potential.

When we are performing, we have to bend to avoid breaking. Adaptable performers are able to let go of their expectations for the specifics of the performance itself. They shift from their high expectations for particular outcomes to reliance on an inner belief in their ability to adjust. No matter what conditions are thrown at them, they do their best. They don't get caught up in the outcome or the rough moments along the way. This allows them to be resourceful, versatile, and resilient.

Our lives are so routine heavy, it can seem as though the ability to adapt isn't all that crucial. Yet a Duke University study found that only 40 percent of our decisions are actually habit based.¹⁰⁵ If we perfect our habits, those decisions can be effective. But what are we doing with the other 60 percent of our decisions? How effectively are we responding? When we focus on perfection in performance, we miss possibilities; when we focus on adaptability, however, we remain open to opportunities.

Interestingly, just as destructive perfection correlates to a higher level of depression, adaptability correlates to fewer depressive symptoms and a lower level of stress.¹⁰⁶ Stress occurs when we feel responsible for things outside of our control. With an adaptable mind, we aren't trying to control our environment and every element in it, the way we might during perfect preparation; we are accepting that we don't know what might happen next and are trusting ourselves to respond to whatever comes our way.

Facing Down the Unknown

The acronym VUCA, which stands for “volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity,” has become popular in the human development arena, especially within organizations.¹⁰⁷ Birthed out of the military and the challenges that generals face when waging war, it also describes many other environments in which we perform—environments full of problems and opportunities and occasionally catastrophes that will surprise us. (Parenting comes to mind.)

For me, the biggest performance of my life was my wedding, and I might have used VUCA to describe it. My wife and I had spent nine months planning and perfecting every detail: flowers, band, food, invitations, seating charts—you know the deal. It's like a part-time job with a goal of making the day as perfect as possible. After all, you're planning to have that day only once

in your lifetime.

We were getting married in August in Washington, DC, in a venue with a beautiful courtyard. We decided that if it was nice outside, we would take advantage of it. On the day of the wedding, the weather forecast looked good, so we green-lighted the outdoor ceremony. Yet as the day progressed, the weather changed. That evening at around 6:15, a storm rolled in—right in time for our 6:30 wedding. As it poured, the guests arrived and congregated in the lobby while my three-year-old nephew sang, “Rain, rain, go away.” Finally, the storm passed, the guests headed to their seats, and the ceremony began.

I didn’t know about all the many problems that were solved that day until later. The florist had forgotten to put wood panels below the aisle runner. After the rain, we would have been sinking into the lawn if the wedding planner hadn’t caught it and had her husband come to our rescue—buying wood and placing it under the runner for support. My dad took one look at the dance floor and knew it was too small—anyone who has been to a wedding with me knows that I need room to operate—so he had them make the area bigger. Then, as the winds picked up, my parents had to get up and hold the tent we were married under, to ensure it wouldn’t blow away. Heck, we even had a wedding crasher sit down for dinner at the reception, before she was escorted out of the ballroom.

Was the day “perfect”? Not if you compare it to the very specific plans we had made. But was it the best wedding we could have ever asked for? Absolutely. We adapted, remained present, and were so grateful to have everyone we cared about in one room. We danced the night away and had the time of our lives.

The best performances of our lives are not meant to be perfect. We humans are amazing creatures who have the ability to adapt and problem solve. And the unknown is what makes performances so special.

While a wedding is one of the most important days in anyone’s life, it may not seem as important—in a life-and-death way—when compared with that critical moment when Captain Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger miraculously landed an airplane on the Hudson River, becoming the most famous pilot in America.

Losing both engines at 2,800 feet with 150 passengers on board was nothing short of a nightmare. Sully was extremely well trained and experienced, but even he admits that he had not trained specifically for that

moment. In an interview with Katie Couric on *60 Minutes*, he said, “It was the worst, sickening, pit-of-your-stomach-falling-through-the-floor feeling I’ve ever felt in my life. I knew immediately it was very bad.”¹⁰⁸ Although he had never expected to crash a plane, he believes he was always perfectly prepared to avoid such a catastrophe.

For a moment after the birds hit the plane and the engines went out, he was in disbelief. Yet he did what he knew he had to do, taking control over the airplane so he could adjust as quickly as possible. This would be nothing like any other flight in his forty-two years of flying—not even his time as a fighter pilot with the Air Force or his years teaching other pilots how to handle a crisis. His only option was to use momentum to glide the airplane, and the only place he could land was on the Hudson River.

Keep in mind, Sully’s decision to land the plane happened just one minute after the birds had hit the engine. He had to act fast. He had to be open to possibilities, not rigidly locked into one idea of how the flight was supposed to go. He had to quickly let go of what *should* happen, accept what *had* happened, and consider what *could* happen. The only thing that mattered was landing in a way that limited the impact as much as possible.

Sully told the crew: “Brace for impact.”

As he explained the situation later to Katie Couric, she said, “But there was still a big if.”

He replied, “I was sure I could do it.”

That statement reminds me of Kobe’s quip to Laron Profit: “I work too hard for the ball not to go in.” Sully knew he could be resourceful in the moment and solve what problems would come. As he said to Couric, “I think in many ways . . . my entire life up to that moment had been in preparation to handle that particular moment.”¹⁰⁹ He had taken every step necessary to learn how to avoid a catastrophic accident. And that allowed him to be adaptable.

The great performers turn over every stone in preparation so they can handle the unknowns of the performance—and every performance has unknowns. Elite performers develop a relationship with the unknown; they control what they can control in preparation so they can let go of control in performance.

Your job may not be a matter of life and death like a surgeon’s or a pilot’s, but you will have moments in your life that will surprise you—problems you hadn’t anticipated that crop up when you are in the middle of an important

performance of one kind or another. I hope you will prepare for those moments so you can adapt to whatever the circumstance asks of you. When you prepare with perfection in mind, you can be resourceful, perform at your best, and be satisfied with the result.

Your Career Success—and Your Organization’s Success—Depend on It

In organizations, adaptability has become an acknowledged necessity—for employees, leaders, and entire teams—and with good reason. Markets and environments are changing faster than ever, and companies require adaptation if they are to stay relevant. For the past twenty years, organizational psychologists and others have worked on iterations of an adaptive performance scale or measurement tool, designed to assess how well individuals can adjust their behaviors to more effectively respond to the environment and the needs of others.¹¹⁰ They’ve studied how well organizations diverge from their strategy when the environment calls for it.¹¹¹ They’ve assessed the essentials of being a flexible leader.¹¹² Along the way, many have concluded that as uncertainty in the workforce and global markets continues to rise, teams that are adaptable while performing will be in a better position to thrive.

One particular aspect of adaptability has been highlighted as a must-have skill for companies and leaders: agility. The respected consulting firm McKinsey & Company found that agility—when “leaders and managers moved quickly when challenged” and when organizations rapidly “adjusted to changes and to new ways of doing things”—pays off for companies. Their study discovered that “both role clarity and operational discipline are highly ranked practices among agile organizations but not among the least agile ones.”¹¹³ In other words, to be agile, organizations need perfect preparation in the form of clarity and discipline. Other research has shown that agility and resilience lead to less workplace burnout¹¹⁴ and higher organizational intelligence.¹¹⁵

Whether you are a leader or not, what may be most important to know and remember is that adaptability improves long-term job performance, partially because it enables us to step in and out of different roles.¹¹⁶ A study that followed MBA students on their progress in the business world after graduation found that adaptability was the strongest predictor of career

success, compared with all the other emotional and social intelligence competencies.¹¹⁷ Another study revealed that the most adaptable financial services sales executives performed better as well.¹¹⁸ Adaptability helps us perform better because it allows us to adjust to an ever-changing performance environment.

Exercise Section

Becoming an Adaptable Perfectionist

A few years ago, I was working with a young aspiring lawyer who had already failed her bar exam twice. She reached out to me because she had done all the perfect preparation necessary to pass, but something was getting in her way. In fact, she had decided that she didn't even want to practice law, but because she was in a family of lawyers, passing the bar would offer her a great sense of pride. We met a few times, and it was clear that she was struggling with her ability to adapt to the exam environment and answer to the best of her ability. We talked about how she could blend her perfectionistic preparation with an adaptable performance. Then we went to work. We played counting games, we used improv, and more. We trained her adaptable performance mind. She took the test a third time, and much to her delight, she passed.

When do you need to be more perfectionistic in your preparation or more adaptable in your performance? Which is more of a struggle for you?

We can perfect our preparation all we want, but if we are unable to adapt when performing, it may be all for naught. That's why you see so many high achievers and perfectionists in college who then struggle in their transition into the workforce. Straight As are not a good predictor of career success. Neither perfection nor adaptation is easy to tap into. A perfectionistic approach is hard because it requires you to hold yourself accountable to a high standard of excellence, which doesn't always feel good. Being adaptable is hard because it requires you to develop a comfortable relationship with the unknown and a cognitive approach that might go against the way your brain naturally operates. We are creatures of experience and story, and our brains are constantly trying to create meaning and make predictions.

Some of the greatest performers in the world know they have perfectionistic tendencies, and they know when it's helpful and when it's

harmful. They learn how to leverage perfectionism in preparation and let go of it in performance. They work to become adaptable perfectionists, preparing with attention to every possible detail so they can feel free to let go and adjust to any possible condition.

As performers, it's up to us to create systems to develop our perfectionism in preparation and our adaptability in performance, so that at some point those systems become more habitual. With that in mind, let's look at how you can create systems that will transform your approach and help you shift your mindset.

Pre-Mortem

For perfection in preparation, create systems and processes that force you to constantly iterate and prepare for as many eventualities as you can imagine. One method to help is a “pre-mortem,” which I first learned about in a 2007 *Harvard Business Review* article by Gary Klein.¹¹⁹ Ask yourself the following questions to force your brain into thinking about some of the worst possible scenarios:

1. What will go wrong?
2. How could this end in disaster?
3. What solutions can you put into place, leveraging what is within your control, to mitigate this?

Give yourself space to edit and audit your craft to account for these possible situations. Journal and reflect on what you could do better in preparation to handle tough situations in performance. Remember, a surprise that shows up more than once is something you can train for.

Concentration Grid

Try this out: Find a partner and set a timer for one minute. Your partner will say a random number (e.g., 55), and your job will be to find that number, cross it off, and then continue to find the next numbers sequentially (e.g., 56, 57, 58 . . .). The goal is to find as many numbers as possible in one minute. But while you are doing this, your partner should distract you—talk to you, turn the

lights on and off, say a different number, and so forth.

Throughout the exercise, when you have a distracting thought or get stuck, work to absorb or adapt to what's happening, but keep your mind focused on the task. How many numbers did you get in one minute? Now try again, and have your partner say a different starting number and use different distracting techniques. Remember, the key is to train your brain to be adaptable.

57	17	54	73	30	47	79	32	59	12
37	04	63	10	26	84	18	25	06	52
71	23	50	00	40	69	13	49	44	67
41	66	45	78	01	85	56	20	75	61
87	29	82	05	27	34	38	93	07	16
58	95	35	48	91	72	15	80	64	33
11	77	19	60	09	22	97	02	98	28
43	83	51	90	96	74	86	94	53	42
89	70	03	24	92	62	31	81	08	88
36	65	99	39	55	14	46	68	76	21

You can find the concentration grid and many of the tools referenced in this book at my website, strongskills.co/book.

Adaptable Travel

When was the last time you explored the world around you? Many of us have become drones in our typical day-to-day experience and our physical environment, running on autopilot as we rely on the same old routes or on technology to find the perfect route from point A to point B. When you are not in a time-sensitive situation, turn off your navigation app and see whether you can find a new way home from work, to the grocery store, or to some other location. You'll be amazed by how adaptable you are when you put yourself in new situations and force yourself to spontaneously respond to your environment.

Try improv or standup comedy, or enter a freestyle competition (dancing or rapping).

OK, OK, I know that probably sounds terrifying to you, but seriously—practicing improvisation and in-the-moment creativity can prime our performance mind. For improv, there are so many great games you can play. Perhaps the most well-known game is “Yes, and.” In fact, “Yes, and” is more than a game; it’s a way of thinking.

Many times we answer challenges by saying, “Yes, but . . .” This immediately narrows our thinking—focusing us on our expectations and on limited possibilities. When we are performing, we need to be more “Yes, and”—minded.

Find a partner, and begin a story or a conversation about anything. Pick something random, and begin with a simple sentence like “On Saturday, I went fishing” or “My brother is a doctor.” Your partner must then add to the story with a sentence that begins with “Yes, and . . .” For example, “Yes, and I caught a shoe” or “Yes, and he faints at the sight of a needle.” Go back and forth while telling the story, creating something different and full of surprising twists and turns with each “Yes, and . . .” statement.



When you train your mind to be adaptable, it learns how to deal with difficult environments. Your mind will become more agile, and your capacity in performance will grow. At the same time, it’s important to remember that striving for perfection is not a crime; in fact, it will help you get to exactly where you want to go. You just need to be intentional about when to use your perfectionistic drive and when to shift into the adaptable mind. And remember, the goal isn’t actually to become perfect—that is unattainable. The true goal is to leverage your perfectionistic mind in preparation so you can be adaptable in performance. And how perfect is that?

Coach Glenn Farello had led his team to an undefeated season, making it to the finals. When he entered the arena, parents and fans reached out to grasp at him, excited for the team's chance to make league history—the first team to make it through an entire season undefeated. You might remember the team from shift 1 and my work with a basketball player, Jared, on his arrogance. On this special night, I was watching the coach's entrance from ten rows behind the basket. I made eye contact with him, and he walked up the bleachers and took a seat next to me.

“Coach, how are you doing?” I asked.

“Honestly, Brian,” he replied, “my mind is going a million miles a minute.”

Throughout the season, I was always amazed by Coach Farello's ability to trust his instincts. He would make substitutions that went against conventional wisdom and always seemed to have a pulse on the rhythm of the game. He had an assistant coach who was an analytics whiz, but when it came time to make decisions, Farello always seemed to go with his gut. I admired him for that, and I believe it gave him an advantage. But sitting with him in the bleachers that night, I could tell he was not in the same headspace. He was about to deliver a critical performance, and his analytical brain was overactive. He was too focused on what needed to happen, why, and what it could mean.

“Do you want to do an activity?” I asked.

He agreed, and I asked him to close his eyes and count to ten slowly, with one caveat: if a thought popped into his head that was not a number, he had to start over again.

Coach closed his eyes, unconcerned with the sold-out crowd that surrounded us, and after just one attempt, he opened his eyes again. “I actually saw the numbers coming at me,” he said. “Everything slowed down and I was just focused on the numbers.” Then he smiled. “Thanks, I'm ready to go.”

From that point on, Coach Farello looked different. He coached his team with instinct as usual and without overanalyzing the magnitude of the game. He drew up a game-winning plan and delivered his first Catholic League championship.

We have all been there—at that moment when paralysis-by-analysis kicks in and gets in the way of a smooth performance. What does it look like for you? What does it *feel* like for you? For me, it feels like I am a computer with too many browser windows open. I need to shut down and reboot to avoid being overwhelmed by too much data. I become frustrated, flustered, and unable to make decisions. It's crippling.

The analytics revolution has challenged how we make decisions under pressure. In some ways, this focus on data and analysis has been helpful; we're more knowledgeable than ever about the details behind our successes and wins. However, anxiety—which manifests as we think about the future and become overly focused on controlling it—has never been higher.

What's going on? While analysis is a friend when you're preparing, it can be an enemy when you're performing. It distracts us and prevents us from trusting our instinct. Analysis often helps lead to logical strategy, yet many of our most opportune moments require instinct that derives from the gut, not the head.

On the other hand, what happens when we rely too much on our instinct in preparation? How has that worked out for you? For me, it leads to incoherence, limited research, and a lack of truth. When listening solely to instinct, I often become narrow in my focus and less open to possibilities or information that defies what I believe to be right. I may be free flowing, sure—but I don't create a strong enough truth because I have not done the analysis needed.

Analysis in preparation is what encourages our curiosity; it allows us to gather information and seek solutions. It requires us to quantify the elements of our performance—to measure them, track them, and use the information to make steady improvements in our results. Analyzing in preparation is hard work. It requires truth seeking. It's what creates our genius; the most instinctual performances are birthed from hours, days, weeks, months, and even years of analysis. Yet it's also what can hold us back in performance.

Instinct, in contrast, can help us perform under stress, yet it can be what holds us back from preparing adequately. We need the logic and reason of

analysis to tell us anywhere and everywhere we can improve, so that we build the necessary instinct to perform when the time comes. The goal, therefore, is to prepare with sound judgment, good information, and clear goals—and then perform with your natural impulse, your innate inclination, your tendency to trust your senses.

We often think that someone is simply gifted with good instinct, that he or she is “a natural.” But the truth is, that instinct has been developed by tremendous analysis in preparation. The instinct comes through the analysis and through the deep learning that comes from it—not the other way around.

Throughout this shift, as we dive into analysis and instinct, think about your craft and how you can leverage both.

Using Logic and Instinct to Build Patterns of Success

In a data-driven world, our instincts often get buried in analysis. According to one 2011 study, on a typical day, each of us takes in the equivalent of about 174 newspapers’ worth of information—five times the amount we processed in 1986.¹²⁰ That content absorption is incredible. But our brains, which are essentially predictive processing frameworks,¹²¹ have not adapted at a rate to keep up with our technology.

With our brains constantly plugged in, finding the quiet, instinctual space to unplug has become harder and harder. As research continues to lead our decision-making, and as science progresses with new discoveries, we are becoming more and more analytical. With more knowledge, however, comes more responsibility—a responsibility to develop systems to input data and output performance. The ability to output performance lies with our ability to tap into our intuition.

Perhaps the best breakdown of the brain’s ability to analyze and work off instinct comes from Daniel Kahneman, a psychology and public affairs professor who won the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economics for his work on prospect theory. His best-selling book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, is the story of how we think based on two systems. According to Kahneman, “System 1 operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control. System 2 allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it.”¹²²

Later in the book, he pares it down to this: “System 1 is impulsive and intuitive; System 2 is capable of reasoning, and it is cautious.” Kahneman describes intuition as recognition, which makes sense for high performers. Think about the baseball player recognizing a curveball, a quarterback recognizing a defensive play, or a goalie recognizing the trajectory of a shot—all these happen so fast that careful analysis can’t help. Our instinctive mind is fast enough to respond, though.¹²³ Kahneman’s research shows that System 1 influences System 2, which will analyze the information it receives from System 1 when there’s enough time, before then dictating our behavior. Yet both can sometimes produce poor and even irrational results.

In a 1974 article, Kahneman and his research partner Amos Tversky explain that heuristics often get in the way of our decision-making because of the biases that we carry. Heuristics are strategies and systems that we adopt to help us solve a problem efficiently; they are based on our experience. We rely on our heuristic methods to provide us with shortcuts and rules of thumb so we can move forward quickly in our decision-making process. But as Kahneman and Tversky found, this creates a biased approach that is the cause of many mistakes and misjudgments. Relying on heuristics limits our ability to analyze for possibilities and find what is really true, not just similar to our other experiences.¹²⁴

“We need statistical thinking for a world where we can calculate the risk,” said Gerd Gigerenzer, a psychologist who studies decision-making, in a *Harvard Business Review* interview, “but in a world of uncertainty, we need more. We need rules of thumb called heuristics.” He went on to say, “Gut feelings are tools for an uncertain world.”¹²⁵ It is uncertainty that defines a state of performance. We are not in complete control, and we don’t know what might happen next, yet the outcome matters. Because of that uncertainty, we need to rely on instinct to deliver the best possible result. We have to make quick decisions.

When we are preparing, we want to leverage probability, think about statistics, and research the best possible course of action. That process provides us with better data and more experiences, which help us develop more nuanced heuristics. But when a performer has to execute or make an important decision, he or she need not rely on the System 2/analytical brain. Instead, the performer needs to be able to access the System 1/intuitive brain.

Katie Ledecky may end her career as the greatest of all time in her sport. She has won five Olympic gold medals and fifteen world championship gold medals, the most of any female swimmer.¹²⁶ She dominated the NCAA swim record books for two years while at Stanford University, has countless world records, and in 2017 was named Associated Press Female Athlete of the Year. She is now a professional swimmer, and given that she's only in her early twenties, the sky appears to be the limit for her career. (Full disclosure: I have a certain amount of hometown pride when it comes to Ledecky, as we both hail from Montgomery County, Maryland.)

I have spent time with Ledecky's youth coach, Bruce Gemmell, and her strength coach, Lee Sommers. Both worked with Ledecky when she was a teenager and have watched her become the dominant athlete she is today. Ledecky sets highly specific goals for herself in training so that she knows what she is striving for and how to analyze her results and progress.

Three years before the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, where she set multiple world records, Ledecky wrote the number 565 on her pull buoy (a leg float used in swim workouts) as a constant reminder of her goal to swim 3:56 (56) in the 400-meter and 8:05 (5) in the 800-meter freestyle competitions.¹²⁷ She analyzed her results in training every single day. To reach her audacious goals, she set very specific targets for different aspects of her training and logged her results. Her original coach, Yuri Suguiyama, taught her to keep a swim log that detailed more than just times. "Every single day, write down your wellness on a scale of 1 to 10," he told Ledecky, "your nutrition, how well you sleep, how well you slept the night before, and something special you did that day."¹²⁸ The log served as a tool to help Ledecky analyze what had the greatest impact on her results and how carefully she was attending to those things that could help her improve.

In Rio, she swam 3:56.46 and 8:04.79 (a new world record), reaching almost exactly the goals she had trained for within mere fractions of seconds.¹²⁹

Being analytical in preparation is a reflective process, an ability to look back at specific details, data, and feedback and devise a plan for improvement. When analyzing in preparation, there are a few essentials to think about. You want to leverage your curiosity and always seek truth. You want to focus on making gains and tracking those gains so you know how you are progressing.

You want to break down every element of your ability and quantify where you are in your journey. A great coach will help you analyze, hold you accountable to certain standards, and ensure you are improving. Thorough analysis takes every possibility into account and leaves no stone unturned.

Analysis is critical for developing your skill, your will, and ultimately your instinct in performance.

Analysis Requires Curiosity

A legendary basketball coach who once coached Carmelo Anthony, Kobe Bryant, and LeBron James explained the difference between LeBron and Kobe on the one hand and Carmelo on the other. The coach explained that Carmelo is a “yes, sir” guy—someone who will do what you tell him to do. But Kobe and LeBron are “why” guys—they need to know why the coach is doing what he is doing. Kobe, specifically, was unabashed in his praise for the importance of curiosity. In an interview with Cal Fussman, Kobe mentioned that one of his favorite books is *Curious George*. “Curiosity, I think, is the most important quality you can have. With curiosity, you figure things out. You are always looking for ways to get better, looking for reasons as to why certain things work. . . . That curiosity leads you to knowledge.”¹³⁰ Sure, Carmelo was able to execute nightly on the court, and as a result he became an NBA All-Star, but perhaps with a little more curiosity he might have become—like Kobe and LeBron—one of the all-time greats.

For his book *The Corner Office*, Adam Bryant interviewed seventy CEOs and asked them, “What qualities do you see most often in those who succeed?” The most common answer was passionate curiosity.¹³¹ Research has also shown that curious children are better able to grasp basic math and reading, and that curiosity is especially important in determining success for children in underserved areas.¹³²

Questions are the tool of the curious, enabling performers to get to the root causes of their results—for better and for worse. Asking questions helps us solve problems, iterate and innovate, and do better over the long term. Two experts in the past two years have written extensively on the power of questions: Hal Gregersen, executive director of the MIT Leadership Center and author of *Questions Are the Answer*, and Warren Berger, journalist, student of innovation and creativity, and author of the best seller *A More Beautiful*

Question. Their research offers a persuasive argument that great questions can help any individual or organization break through when we're stuck. Simply put, successful people rely on, as Berger calls it, the "power of inquiry."

Toyota's famous 5 Whys system, originally developed by Sakichi Toyoda in the 1930s, is a perfect example. This approach builds a ladder of questions that encourage employees to explore the deeper causes of a problem and why it exists.¹³³ Asking *why* stimulates our curiosity, unlocks possibility, and guides our progress, and good preparation demands it.

Following is an example of how the 5 Whys might be used to analyze a problem during preparation:

1. **"Why did I not meet my sales target this month?"** I didn't generate enough leads, so I didn't have access to enough potential clients.
2. **"Why did I not generate enough leads?"** I did not hit my goal of ten cold calls a day.
3. **"Why did I not hit my cold call goal?"** I was often distracted by social media during the workday.
4. **"Why was I distracted by social media?"** Because I lack the discipline to focus on the task at hand.
5. **"Why do I lack discipline?"** Because I don't have systems in place to limit my social media intake and hold me accountable to meeting my sales target.

As you can see, when there's a problem with progress and performance, the 5 Whys approach creates analysis that leads to a potential solution.

Quantification and Marginal Gains

The best teams in the world capture their results, day by day, week by week, and focus on moving the needle, even if it's just by small percentages. When I work with performers on their mental game, if we can unlock 1 percent of their potential, the outcomes can be quite profound. To achieve that 1 percent, we need to analyze how we are getting better and quantify that whenever possible.

The story of the British cycling team, led by their coach Sir Dave Brailsford, has been referenced in books and education policy, and has been

embedded into corporate cultures. Brailsford applied the concept of marginal gains—incremental improvements in every area that would accumulate into major performance progress—to the team’s training, with incredible results.

To achieve marginal gains, you have to quantify and analyze. As the great management thought leader Peter Drucker said, “What gets measured gets managed.”¹³⁴ Brailsford wanted to measure specifically how he could help his athletes improve. If *results* are defined as “something that happens as a consequence,” you must be able to analyze those things that are creating the consequence. Brailsford was so specific in everything he did that he found small advantages in the most micro of places. “By analyzing the mechanics area in the team truck, we discovered that dust was accumulating on the floor, undermining bike maintenance,” he explains in *Harvard Business Review*.¹³⁵ “So we painted the floor white, in order to spot any impurities.” He goes on to describe “small improvements everywhere”—in handwashing, food preparation, sleep habits, travel—and says, “Taken together, we felt they gave us a competitive advantage.”

The only way Brailsford could spot those opportunities was if the team actually measured and analyzed the results. Preparation needs to be a breeding ground for measurement. We can train our bodies and our minds for our craft, but it’s important to find ways to quantify each so we can analyze progress.

Brailsford also talks about what being results-focused did for the team, the “contagious enthusiasm” for finding small ways to improve. “There’s something inherently rewarding about identifying marginal gains,” he confesses. “Our team became a very positive place to be.”¹³⁶

Brailsford’s focus on marginal gains paid incredible dividends. His team won an astounding eight gold medals in 2008 and gained another six at the Rio Olympics in 2016. Quantification, analysis, and marginal gains helped create one of the most consistent, powerful teams in sport.

Of course, Brailsford is not the only coach focused on quantification and marginal gains. Gregg Berhalter, head coach of the US men’s national soccer team, instituted a point system when he took over in late 2018. “In practice, everything is counted,” a client who had worked with Berhalter on another team told me. “He wants us to be constantly competing, and he wants to quantify how successful or unsuccessful we are.” Berhalter and his players are quantifying everything they do on the soccer field: scoring, passing, defense, and other principles and skills that drive success in a match. Midfielder Aaron

Long explains, “Points are being posted on the board, and you want to be on top of that board to prove it to yourself, to prove it to your teammates, that you want to be the player that they want to play with.”¹³⁷ It’s too early to know whether Berhalter will have the same success that Brailsford’s marginal gains had with the British cyclists, but I am hoping the 2022 World Cup will include an American soccer team.

Research has shown that when you create a team of high performers, as Berhalter is attempting to do, all boats can rise with that tide. A 2017 study out of Northwestern University found that sitting within twenty-five feet of a high performer at work improved an employee’s performance by 15 percent whereas sitting within twenty-five feet of a low performer hurt the employee’s performance by 30 percent.¹³⁸ To help people become high performers, you have to quantify what being a high performer means and analyze everybody’s progress toward that goal. That competitive analysis is the lifeblood of championship teams and elite performers.

Paralysis by Analysis

The phrase *paralysis by analysis* is often used to describe performance struggles. We think of it when we see people choke under pressure. One of the most memorable performance chokes in recent memory was at the Miss Teen USA pageant in 2007 when one contestant was asked why Americans struggle with geography. The young lady went into analysis mode and answered with an incoherent mixture of prepared buzzwords. The truth is, though, we all have the potential to choke under pressure. One famous example comes from one of the most talented golfers in the game, Greg Norman. Norman was ranked No. 1 in the world for a remarkable 331 weeks, but by the end of his career, he had won only two majors and had finished second a remarkable seven times.¹³⁹ Norman could do it all on the golf course but was well known for struggling in high-pressure situations and specifically for “choking” at the most sacred golf tournament in the world—the Masters.

The year was 1996. Norman had led the entire tournament and was six strokes up on Nick Faldo, who was in second place entering the final day. Throughout Norman’s golf career, he had been in the lead in eight major tournaments entering the final day, yet had won only one of them. “I could feel the nervousness emanating from Greg,” Faldo later said. “He gripped and

regripped the club, as though he could not steel himself to hit the ball.”¹⁴⁰

According to one sport psychologist, Norman had admitted, “I’m probably the only guy in the world who thinks, ‘I don’t know if I can hold it.’” In regard to the previous night, Norman said, “I didn’t sleep a wink.” Amazingly, he tried to fix his swing midround. He shot a 78, which was the worst round of the day, and his performance was the biggest collapse in Masters history.¹⁴¹

Have you ever been in an important meeting and lost your train of thought? Or perhaps you are giving a speech, and you feel your body tense up and find you’re at a loss for words. Why does this happen? In her book *Choke*, cognitive scientist Sian Beilock explains it for us. She defines choking as:

poor performance that occurs in response to the perceived stress of a situation. Choking is not simply poor performance, however. Choking is sub-optimal performance. It’s when you—or an individual athlete, actor, musician, or student—perform worse than expected given what you are capable of doing, and worse than what you have done in the past.¹⁴²

So why does it happen? Beilock found that choking occurs when “we pay too much attention to what we are doing.” This suggests that when we know how to perform a skill, we are better off going on autopilot than overthinking.¹⁴³

Analyzing our performance is certainly one way to pull our attention away from where it should be. Untimely analysis overrides the instinct and heuristics that should be guiding our execution of the performance we’ve already mastered. When this happens, we second-guess our judgment—a scenario that can be a performance killer. In an interview, Beilock explained that choking can be both a somatic (body) and a cognitive (mind) experience. Elite performers, she said, focus on:

what they have to get done. They are not thinking about how their wrist is, or if their elbow is bent, or every step of their swing. . . . Doing that prevents them from paralysis by analysis—this idea when you start paying too much attention to skills that should just run on autopilot, you actually muck them up.¹⁴⁴

So, the big question is, when are you overthinking? And how can you let go of analysis when it's time to unlock your instinct in performance?

The Genius of Instinct

Evan was the hardest-working guy on the wrestling team. He would analyze his opponents continuously, watching film over and over to pick up on their tendencies, focusing on the higher-ranked opponents. He did the same with his own performances. He had performed fairly well in the past, but it was clear he had untapped potential. He would often lose matches that he clearly had the capacity to win. His preparation was top-notch, but he seemed to be bringing his analytical mind into his performances. On the day of a performance, he would obsess over the rankings of his opponents. Instead of letting himself go and relying on his instinct to compete, he would overthink his shots and miss opportunities that were right in front of him. He was using analysis when he needed instinct.

For his senior year, we discussed how he could trust in his training and compete on instinct once he was on the mat. He decided to try wrestling without wearing his contact lenses. After all, it didn't matter who he was wrestling or what his eyes told him; what mattered was what he felt. Wrestling without contacts was a drastic measure, but it did help Evan free himself to trust his body and his muscle memory more than his mind—and it helped him have a successful season. What Evan came to realize was that his analytical mind, which served him well in so many areas of his life (he had won awards for academics, too), was holding him back in performance.

Analytics in sports has revolutionized how every game is played. In baseball, the home run ball is more valued; in basketball, it's the three-pointer; football teams are more intentional about when they go for two-point conversions. The best organizations know that analysis can help create strategy—but when it comes to in-the-moment decisions, instinct is often what is needed.

I once gave a talk at the Peabody Institute at Johns Hopkins University, which serves as a conservatory for some of the top musicians in the world, about the preparation mind and the performance mind. At the end of my talk, a young blind musician came up to me and said that my talk was exactly in

alignment with how he approaches music. Because he can't see, he doesn't concern himself with how he is being judged or analyzed; he just trusts his instinct and plays. He told me that musicians with sight have a tendency to overload their mind with analysis, when what they need to do is just trust. This young musician doesn't spend time critiquing himself while performing; instead, he lets go of any analysis and focuses on the task at hand. He plays with his instinct, and the crowd can feel that.

Some of history's greatest thought leaders have looked to intuition for genius and creativity. Anne Lamott writes in the legendary book *Bird by Bird*:

You get your intuition back when you make space for it, when you stop the chattering of the rational mind. The rational mind doesn't nourish you. You assume that it gives you the truth, because the rational mind is the golden calf that this culture worships, but this is not true. Rationality squeezes out much that is rich and juicy and fascinating.¹⁴⁵

Steve Jobs once said, "Intuition is a very powerful thing, more powerful than intellect, in my opinion."¹⁴⁶ But what does Jobs mean by "intuition"? I believe that intuition and instinct are about trusting your gut and taking action, whereas analysis is more of a brain or thought exercise. As Kahneman explains, what we commonly think of as trained instinct is about instant recognition and fast response—the work of the System 1 mind and the heuristics it develops. But those heuristics are developed through experiences; the more experiences we have and the better we understand those experiences, the better our instinct will serve us. We must analyze every outcome, result, technique, and tactic in preparation so we are ready to respond immediately to whatever the circumstances throw at us in performance. We tap into our instinct by building on many of the other performance mind frameworks—such as being present, comfortable, and process-oriented—so we can appease System 2.

We can chalk up to instinct some of the greatest individual performances in sports. Ben Crenshaw's longtime golf coach and friend, Harvey Penick, passed away the week before the 1995 Masters Tournament, and Crenshaw attended his funeral the day before the tournament started, before hustling to famed Augusta, Georgia, to compete. Yet at the age of forty-three, with only one major win on his resume (the Masters in 1984), Crenshaw miraculously

won the most prestigious golf tournament in the world. Reflecting on the week, Crenshaw said, “So many unexplained things happened that week. I hadn’t played worth a darn in a good while, but I gained a lot of confidence that first day and it kept going. I was very relaxed, but determined, too. . . . I played by instinct the whole week.”¹⁴⁷

You know what instinctive performance feels like—you’ve felt it before. It’s when the performance seems easy, when you feel calm and don’t question your choices in the moment. Let’s dig into how it works—and why it matters.

Focusing on Action

In his interview on the podcast *Big Questions with Cal Fussman* (which I mentioned in shift 1), Dr. Oz also talked about the necessity for instinctive action. Early in his career, Dr. Oz faced a case where a man was brought to the hospital already unconscious after a heart attack. Although he didn’t have the chance to speak to his patient about what had happened, Dr. Oz knew he needed to act decisively to save the man’s life. That moment made a major impact on him:

I *instinctively* knew what I needed to do—full court press, do everything you can to keep this brain alive. . . . In your moment of need in the operating room, you do not want to be surrounded by intellectuals. You want to be surrounded by people of action. Just do it. And then react if it doesn’t work. I can fix a lot of problems. I can’t fix a non-action.¹⁴⁸

You’re probably familiar with the concept of the flow state, or the optimal state of performance, which was studied extensively by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Athletes and others call it “the zone,” and it is a good example of instinct at work. Csikszentmihalyi identified one element that I think is especially important to the idea of instinct: “the merging of action and awareness.” He writes, “People become so involved in what they are doing that the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; they stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing. . . . In flow there is no need to reflect, because the action carries us forward as if by magic.”¹⁴⁹

Bringing our attention and focus consistently back to what is happening in the moment, and tuning out or shutting down any analysis from System 2, helps bring on the state of flow. The result is that important merging of awareness and action, and it elevates how we feel in the performance—flow is a state of happiness—and how well we perform.

In his legendary book *The Inner Game of Tennis*, Tim Gallwey discusses analysis and instinct at great length, and even offers us a formula: performance = potential – interference. This speaks to how analysis (interference) can get in the way of performance. Gallwey also picks up on the idea of awareness and action by describing two selves: Self 1 is the brain, a judgmental voice that instructs us on what to do. Self 2 is the body, which is in charge of action. Self 1 can get in the way of Self 2, which leads to paralysis by analysis. When we rely on Self 2, however, we remain solely focused on the task, and we let our instinct take over to accomplish it.¹⁵⁰

Perhaps the best way to think about focusing on the body and action, and relying on our instinct, is with Gallwey's example of a cat stalking a bird:

Effortlessly alert, he crouches, gathering his relaxed muscles for the spring. No thinking about when to jump, nor how he will push off with his hind legs to attain the proper distance, his mind is still and perfectly concentrated on his prey. No thought flashes into his consciousness of the possibility or consequences of missing his mark. He sees only bird. Suddenly the bird takes off; at the same instant, the cat leaps. With perfect anticipation he intercepts his dinner two feet off the ground. Perfectly, thoughtlessly executed action, and afterward, no self-congratulations, just the reward inherent in his action: the bird in his mouth.¹⁵¹

That is instinct in action.

Self-Judgment Can Kill Instinct

The human gut has been referred to as the second brain. Scientists have found what they call an enteric nervous system (ENS), which consists of two thin layers of more than 100 million nerve cells that line our gastrointestinal tract, from esophagus to rectum. Jay Pasricha, MD, the director of the Johns

Hopkins Center for Neurogastroenterology, points out, “The ENS doesn’t seem capable of thought as we know it, but it communicates back and forth with the brain—with profound results.”¹⁵² As a performer, it’s essential that you create an awareness of your gut—and everything those millions of nerves can tell you about what your body is experiencing. Your gut can especially tell you when you are overanalyzing, letting self-judgment and doubt take over, and building unnecessary anxiety.

Judgment often gets in the way of our inner instinctive genius. We are wired to care about what others think of us; some of our biggest fears include rejection, failure, and embarrassment (we’ll talk more about them in later shifts). These fears are why so many of us are afraid of public speaking. Most moments of performance come with risk of failure, and our fear can bring that Self 1 voice—analytical, judgmental—to life. In order to perform with an instinctive flair and flow, we need to concern ourselves less with judgment. Analysis as a reaction to our fear can help us prepare, but in performance that fear holds us back.

Nick Foles started the season as a backup quarterback for the Philadelphia Eagles, but was thrust into the starting role after an injury to the starter. He unexpectedly helped lead the team to the playoffs, where almost nobody envisioned what would come next—a run to the Super Bowl. Against all odds, Foles found himself on the biggest stage in football. It was fourth down, late in the second quarter, and the Eagles were down 15–12. They had a chance to tie the game with a field goal, or they could go for a touchdown to take the lead. Coach Doug Pederson, a former backup quarterback, called a time-out.

Foles came to the sideline, ran right up to his coach, and asked, “Do you want Philly-Philly?” Philly-Philly was a special, risky trick play.

Pederson, with a laminated, color-coded play sheet bigger than his head, turned to Foles, paused for just a few seconds, and then said, “Yeah, let’s do it.”

Moments later, Foles came to the line, yelled a few instructions, and motioned to the right. The center hiked the ball to the running back, who handed it to the tight end, who threw the ball back to Foles, who was in the end zone for the touchdown. As Foles came to the bench, he said to Pederson, “I was feeling it right there.”¹⁵³

Pederson was no stranger to trusting his instincts on risky plays. “You just have a feel for that, as a former quarterback, as a play caller—you just get a

sense,” he said later. Of course, the play wasn’t something they drew up on the spot. The coaching staff had studied it and watched the Chicago Bears run it successfully the previous year. They did their research and analyzed every single detail necessary to make it successful. Their analyses in preparation guided their instinct in performance.¹⁵⁴

At the very core of Self 1 and Self 2 is the difference between judgment and observation. In observation, we tap into our instinct, recover, and move on to the next action. That’s what Foles and Pederson both did: observe and act, not judge or hesitate. Instead of listening to Self 1 in performance, the goal is to focus your mind by talking to yourself calmly about simple observations—especially what you need to do next.

Great performers understand that in intense environments, often there’s no time to analyze; instead, they have to rely on instinct. Those instincts often arise as the result of tremendous past analysis. Once the analysis is done, it’s up to you to unlock your inner genius and find out what you’re capable of.

How can you perform using instinct? What gets in the way of trusting your instinct?

Exercise Section

Developing Your Analysis and Instinct

Both analysis in preparation and instinct in performance can be hard to execute. It’s easy to slip into the opposite thinking or mindset—to rely too much during preparation on what we believe is true rather than rigorously measuring, tracking, and setting goals, or to let judgment and analysis kick in during performance when we need the speed of our instinctive mind the most. If we just relied on instinct all the time, we would be poor goal setters, strategy developers, and decision makers. If we relied on analysis all the time, we might never pull the trigger and take action.

Below are ways to develop your analysis and your instinct alike, because—as with all the other shifts—we need to be able to leverage each when it is truly needed.

Sian Beilock, who we previously discussed, has studied the science behind choking and suggests that singing a song or whistling can reduce the possibility of folding under pressure.¹⁵⁵ This is especially helpful in a sport like golf, which has so many stops and starts that it can be difficult for players to maintain their performance mind and avoid slipping into analysis. I have helped many golfers find success through singing or humming between shots. Tim Gallwey suggests tennis players hum “da, da, da” or focus on the sound of the racket hitting the ball to find the instinctive rhythm in their stroke.¹⁵⁶

Mind-Dump

Another favorite tool for disengaging your analytical mind is something called a mind-dump. I advised a golf client, who would always focus too much on her score, to use this exercise. Simply look up at the sky with your head bent back. With your eyes looking up, open your mouth for three seconds and then slowly tilt your head forward so that you are looking straight in front of you. The mind-dump serves as a reset for your mind and can help you be more open to your instinctive self.

Mind-Body

Sometimes, the key to a good performance is separating our thoughts from our physical actions—pushing the thinking or analysis into the background so our bodies can do what they need to do. One way to train for this is to find a partner who can play the “mind” while you play the “body.” Walk around in a room with the mind doing the analyzing—talking out loud about everything that comes to mind. The body’s job is just to walk. Then switch roles.

What did you notice? Most people realize that much of what the mind commented on was unimportant. It’s a great exercise for understanding that the space between thought and action is where our instincts come into play. The key is to be driven in performance not by the mind’s analysis but instead by the instinctual space that you create. That’s where masterpieces occur.

Prepare with Why Questions

As I described in this shift, questions are powerful in preparation because they

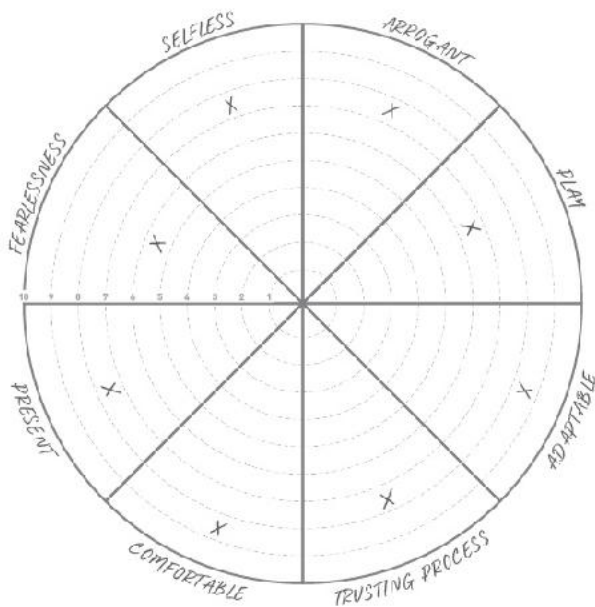
help direct our analysis of our results. It can be easy to think of questions that start with *why* as a way to solve problems, but it's just as important to ask such questions about our successes. If we don't understand why we performed better, how can we repeat our most successful performances? Here is a chart that shows sample why questions for a few types of performers. What are some why questions for you?

PERFORMER	WHY QUESTIONS
Athlete	Why did I miss half my shots in practice today? Why is my time 0.6 seconds better today? Why is my teammate passing the ball to me less often?
Salesperson	Why was last month so much better than the month before?
Actor	Why does the director want me in that specific place?
Musician	Why am I supposed to play a certain chord at a certain time?
Speaker	Why is this organization bringing me in to present a talk?

Performance Profile

A performance profile is a great way to analyze your strengths and weaknesses. You can use it to provide yourself with a tangible score, which can be extremely useful, especially for intangible qualities (such as confidence). With a starting score and a targeted goal, you can track your progress in preparation.

First, choose eight factors that impact your performance. Ideally, at least half of the themes should be mental. Assign each slice of the pie to one of the factors, and score yourself on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being a low score and 10 being a high score. Then mark your score on the chart by either shading in the appropriate section or marking the section with an *X*. I created one specifically for my podcast. I used the performance shifts so you can see how I assess myself when performing while the mic is on.



Once your performance profile is complete, use it to guide your preparation, working to increase your score and fill in the pie.

Second-Order Thinking

In his huge best seller *Principles*, Ray Dalio writes, “Failing to consider second- and third-order consequences is the cause of a lot of painfully bad decisions, and it is especially deadly when the first inferior option confirms your own biases. Never seize on the first available option, no matter how good it seems, before you’ve asked questions and explored.”¹⁵⁷

During preparation, when you think you’ve come up with a solution to a performance hurdle or a path to improving your performance, ask yourself, “And then what?” Force yourself to seriously consider the idea from all angles, but especially consider the consequences. This is known as “second-order thinking,” and it is an essential way to prepare for any outcome so that you don’t hesitate when you need to act.

The WILL Method

WILL is an acronym for four crucial questions that can help you analyze your

opportunities for growth. Ask yourself these questions after every performance:

1. What went **well**?
2. What can I **improve**?
3. What did I **learn** about myself?
4. What did I **learn** about my situation?

Well. Improve. Learn. Learn. That's what it stands for: *WILL*.

□ □ □

The deep-thinking, critical mind that we need for analysis allows us to reflect on how we can constantly improve and become elite performers. By spending time analyzing your inner game, you will be better prepared to let go of that analysis when it's time for your instinct to take over. On the flip side, it's just as important to train your instinctive mind so you can more easily tap into it when it's time to perform. Cultivate your ability to shift from your analytical mind to your instinctive mind, and you will see your performance improve as your enjoyment of performance grows.

While legends like Richard Pryor and George Carlin helped establish stand-up comedy as a force to be reckoned with, in the past thirty years few have done it better than Chris Rock. *Rolling Stone* ranked him the fifth greatest of all time.¹⁵⁸ Before becoming a comedy rock star, he was a cast member on *Saturday Night Live* and briefly on *In Living Color*. Many pundits thought he was trying too hard to be like Eddie Murphy, though, and didn't have a lot of faith in his future.

In an A&E documentary, comedian Conan O'Brien and others explain that when Rock first started out, he needed to work on his performance ability.¹⁵⁹ Today that sounds preposterous, but back then, he was hesitant. He struggled to trust in his abilities. Years later, he admitted that being compared with Eddie Murphy made him hold back. He often bombed onstage as other black comedians, such as Martin Lawrence, were becoming household names. Rock credits those failures as the source of his success today. He realized he had to learn to trust his process, his material, and himself onstage. But to develop that trust, he had to experiment, test ideas, and innovate.

Over a three-year span, Rock honed his approach. He would perform three sets a night and test his material at neighborhood barbershops. He studied other comedians in the Washington, DC, improv scene. He bombed more shows. He sharpened his axe. And that's when he began to find his voice. For those three years, the rising star didn't appear much on TV or in film except for two small supporting roles. But then, in 1996, Rock's hard work and perseverance paid off when HBO offered him his own special, *Bring the Pain*. When it was time to get onstage, he trusted himself, spoke truth . . . and crushed it. Considered one of the best standup sets of all time, the performance catapulted him to superstardom.¹⁶⁰

The turn toward success didn't stop Rock from innovating and

experimenting, though. As he told a reporter:

When I start a tour, it's not like I start out in arenas. Before this last tour, I performed in this place in New Brunswick, [New Jersey,] called the Stress Factory. I did about forty or fifty shows getting ready for the tour. It's like a boxing training camp. I always pick a comedy club to work out in.¹⁶¹

Rock hasn't fallen into the trap of believing he is too successful to learn from others, either. He often sticks around to listen to up-and-coming comics, exposing himself to new ideas, new techniques.

When Rock would show up unannounced to perform for small crowds, he wasn't using material he knew was gold. He was testing new material. As Peter Sims points out in *Little Bets*, his book on deliberate experimentation through small steps of discovery, most of Rock's jokes didn't land—they didn't deliver the results he was hoping for. He would try new material with the openness to elicit feedback to see what worked and what didn't. According to Sims, Rock “tries hundreds (if not thousands) of preliminary ideas, out of which only a handful will make the final cut.”¹⁶² He has to tinker, has to innovate.

We almost never see the artist's first version of a painting or the musician's first attempt at a song, and I know for sure you won't see the first version of this book. Experimenting is what all artists do, and it's what performers must do if they ever want to trust in their process, their material, their skills. Experimentation allows us to introduce new ideas, concepts, and elements into our process so we can improve and better prepare for the future—for that moment when we're in the spotlight.

A great performer very rarely does something truly “original” while performing. The origins of that performance can always be tied to a gym, a small stage, or some other space where the performer feels safe enough to explore—like Chris Rock's comedy clubs. Like scientists, performers need a lab where they can try new things, research, and push for better results. This is essential for great preparation that leads to a great performance. My lab is simply my office. Where is yours?

Performing, on the other hand, is about letting go of our focus on results, being able to handle the unknown, and going all in. It's about believing that

we will be OK, no matter what comes our way. It's about buying into the standards we have for ourselves and not deviating from them based on the current environment or situation. And that requires us to trust the process—to trust in the ideas, the approaches, the methods, the plays, the language that we tried and tested in preparation.

The experimentation we do builds our faith that we will find a solution and a way forward, if we stay the course. In order to better prepare for the unknown, we have to try new things, expose ourselves to new experiences. We have to be willing to be creative in preparation, so when we are performing, we can trust that we have already developed the best possible process. Great performers know that testing new approaches is what leads to discovery, and that discovering some gem of an idea is what unearths unquestioned belief in and reliance on their approach.

If you don't take the time to experiment in the lab during preparation, how will your genius emerge? Where will your creativity spark? How will you feel confident when it's time to perform? Experimenting opens up possibility. It allows us to test limits. How would Chris Rock show up on the big stage if he didn't prepare and test new content over and over? He would never be able to trust in his jokes, his delivery, his process.

Breakthrough performances occur in the lab first and in the arena second. This order matters. If you trust in your process in preparation, and never experiment, then you will miss out on opportunities to learn, grow, and improve. Your focus will be too narrow; your perspective will be too limited. Conversely, by constantly tinkering and experimenting at performance time, you miss the ability to move forward with the conviction necessary to dominate. You will seem hesitant. You might falter. And you will miss opportunities to leverage your training to handle tough situations.

By experimenting in preparation, we give ourselves an opportunity to unlock multiple possibilities. By trusting in our process in performance, we give ourselves an opportunity to unlock our potential.

Experimentation Makes Us Stronger

Perhaps the best example of the power of experimentation is peanuts. Yes, you read that right: peanuts.

The rise in food allergies over the past twenty years has been quite profound. Anaphylactic reactions to food have been increasing at a staggering pace: 377 percent from 2007 to 2016.¹⁶³ And a peanut allergy typically is a lifelong affliction. From 2010 to 2017, peanut allergies grew 21 percent and affected an estimated 2.5 percent of children.¹⁶⁴ So, why are peanut allergies on the rise? Many doctors believe it's because we don't experiment with peanuts when our children are infants. A groundbreaking 2015 study looked at more than 600 high-risk infants aged four months through eleven months. The parents were told either to avoid peanuts entirely or to experiment with them in the babies' diets. These avoidance and consumption instructions continued until the participants were five years old. The study found an 81 percent reduction in peanut allergies in children who consumed peanuts in some form when they were babies compared with those who avoided peanuts.¹⁶⁵ Why? Many scientists tie these results to a concept called "antifragility."

In his book *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*, Nassim Taleb explains that experimentation—with peanuts or any other food—helps build our immune system. The immune system needs to be exposed to possible threats in order to understand how to respond to those threats, or whether to respond at all, thus becoming antifragile.¹⁶⁶

Growth and strength as a performer require experimentation. They demand it. We need the space—mentally and physically—to try new things, to expose ourselves to possible "threats." We need to focus on fortifying our process and abilities, and on improving our results, without being torn down if the results don't come.

The elements of experimentation include trying new things, trying to find truth, and testing hypotheses, all with the purpose of figuring out the best course of action. You experiment and test so that you can execute. Experimentation in preparation is all about opening yourself to new ideas, new situations, new environments, and new challenges; it's about conducting research so you can gain the clarity you need to trust your process.

Expose Yourself to "Threats"

The real purpose of experimentation is to improve results by developing ideas that help us solve problems or deal better with challenges. That's what growth

really is. What happens when we don't experiment? We develop an "allergy" to those things we've avoided—a lack of strength and resilience. We humans are shaped by our experiences: the more experiences we have, the broader our perspective and the more we can trust in our judgment.

A Columbia University study of "fluid intelligence"—the ability to solve problems that we've never encountered before (which happens all the time in performance)—found that the more training people put in, the more fluid intelligence increased. Yet the improvement in fluid intelligence happens "even though the trained task is entirely different from the intelligence test itself."¹⁶⁷ In other words, a diverse preparation full of new and different experiences can actually increase our practical intelligence, or our ability to learn and perform. Studies have shown that openness—seeking out new experiences, new ideas, new learning opportunities, new challenges—is one of the few personality traits tied to increased intelligence.¹⁶⁸

Shunryu Suzuki described the concept of *shoshin*, or "beginner's mind," in his famous work *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*: "This does not mean a closed mind, but actually an empty mind and a ready mind. If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few."¹⁶⁹ Everyone has the capacity to grow their intelligence and their creativity. You just have to set your mind to doing so.

Experimentation Isn't a Lightning Strike

Experimenting is not something we do on a whim or by chance. It requires intention, discipline, grit—and vulnerability. Intention is a common theme throughout almost all the shifts, but it's especially important here. Experimentation requires a disciplined approach to testing ideas and techniques. Perhaps you have an innovative idea that you want to bring to market. What do you do? If you're a restaurateur, you might use pop-ups, soft openings, and market research to test your idea. If you're a software developer, perhaps you'll release a beta version. Experimentation requires feedback and results that help you make progress and build a process you can trust when it's time to execute.

Chris Rock doesn't just write a joke and then either toss it or keep it based on whether it lands the first time he tries it. He breaks the joke apart, puts it

together in a new way, maybe adds an element or two, and then tests it again to see whether changing some aspect made it work. And then he starts the process all over again. Eventually, after he has tested the joke multiple times and in different ways, he makes an informed decision, refining his process.

Experimentation also requires intentional use of time. If you don't set aside time to experiment, this crucial part of preparation can easily fall to the wayside. One of the best productivity models I have seen is Eisenhower's Four Boxes below:

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	Do	Plan
Not Important	Delegate	Eliminate

Experimentation falls in the Plan box, which often gets overlooked because we prefer the satisfaction of immediate results. Yet the Plan box is often the source of strategic growth for organizations, performers, and elite teams. Experimentation may seem not urgent, but if you ignore it, you won't grow—and when organizations and performers don't grow, they become irrelevant.

Another great comedian of our time, Jerry Seinfeld, developed a process to hold himself accountable to experimenting. Brad Isaac, a software developer, got this advice from him:

He told me to get a big wall calendar that has a whole year on one page and hang it on a prominent wall. The next step was to get a big red magic marker. He said for each day that I do my task of writing, I get to put a big red X over that day. “After a few days you’ll have a chain. Just keep at it and the chain will grow longer every day. You’ll like seeing that chain, especially when you get a few weeks under your belt. Your only job next is to not break the chain.”¹⁷⁰

I had a CEO client who used this exercise and had great success when she was trying to be creative. Like Seinfeld and Rock, she knew that she had to be disciplined about experimenting if she wanted to expand her creativity. Seinfeld once said, “Once you start doing only what you’ve already proven you can do, you’re on the road to death.”¹⁷¹ Creativity through experimentation is not something you find; it’s something you plan to do.

It’s not uncommon to become so routine-oriented that we trust our process is right; we fail to push ourselves to explore and experiment. When we take that approach, however, we risk complacency. We may find ourselves facing challenges in our performance that we aren’t prepared to handle.

Performance Is a Process You Execute

In 2013, Nick Saban was profiled as the most dominant coach in college football. At the time, as head coach at University of Alabama, he had already won four national championships, and he would later win two more. That year, Saban did a rare interview with *60 Minutes*, titled “The Perfectionist.” The segment begins with him standing in front of his players in a white polo shirt, with his hands on his hips, as his players bounce up and down chanting, “Get your mind right!”¹⁷² This was how they prepared to take the field on game day. While the piece certainly hit on Saban’s perfectionist tendencies, the takeaways were more focused on process.

The interview, which was the culmination of eight months of following Saban, showcased his high expectations. At one point, the interviewer asked whether he is too tough on his players. Saban looked into the camera and said, “Mediocre people don’t like high achievers, and high achievers don’t like mediocre people.”¹⁷³ It’s abundantly clear which of those two Saban values—which he wants to be seen as and which he wants on his team. But how does one become a high achiever at Alabama? Through a revolutionary approach that Saban designed with the help of a psychiatrist, called “the Process.”

Saban wants his players to focus less on the scoreboard and more on what they can do in the moment to execute their job, to take the right next action. Because football is simply a series of plays, the team focuses entirely on winning the current play. When the play is over, they stop thinking about it and focus on winning the next play. The essence is to focus on the next action

you know you have to take, and trust in the power of that action to get you closer to the results you're driving for. If the team does that, the wins will come.

In the *60 Minutes* episode, Saban said, "The approach was to challenge the players to play every play in a game like it had a history and life of its own, and try to take the other team out of the game, and make it all about us, in terms of what we did."¹⁷⁴ Since watching that interview, I have spent time with pro football players and coaches who have played for or worked with Saban. They all emphasize that his staff and players know exactly what the standards are and can focus on executing to those standards, regardless of how difficult they may be.

While Saban may have popularized the term *process*, it's certainly nothing new. Rick Carlisle, head coach of the Dallas Mavericks, has said, "You have to be so lost in the process that the result will take care of itself."¹⁷⁵ Ken Hitchcock, who over twenty-three years was the head coach of five different NHL teams, once said something similar: "Guys that last long-term embrace the process and haven't got so focused on the wins and losses. They believe in the process. They believe in their own process, and it has a lasting impact."¹⁷⁶

The word *process* has become almost a cliché. But these performance experts understand that a team focused on the process will have a better chance of getting the results, whereas a team focused on results might start tinkering and experimenting when it shouldn't. The process will get lost, and the results won't come. Being process-oriented is a huge performance enhancer. It removes clutter, allows for clear standards, and frees performers to execute to those standards. Of course, we have to build the process through experimenting in preparation, but once it's built, we have to trust it completely—until we're back in preparation mode.

The process is systematic—a series of steps that help you get to the outcome you desire. It serves as an anchor, a center for you to ground yourself and build clarity for performance. Trusting the process shows up when a salesperson continues to make calls until he or she finds the right client for the product. Trusting the process shows up when you give a speech and hold yourself accountable to delivering the speech you've written, refined, and mastered.

Trust means having faith and optimism: if you do your job as you've practiced it, everything will work out. In psychological terms, trust is a process

for dealing with uncertainty or risk. We experiment to build as much certainty as possible, but in the world of performance, certainty does not exist. We have to accept all the unknowns that could crop up, while still having a belief in our ability and capacity to perform. When we combine trust with process, we get an undeniable faith that things will work out. This approach requires vulnerability and courage, but when it's based on strong preparation, it's liberating.

If we are constantly tinkering, changing, trying new things, we never actually commit. We are distracted, and that can stop us from making the right decisions in the moment. We have to put our chips in the pot and go all in. If we can't commit to the process, we're holding ourselves back.

Committing doesn't mean we are rigid or unable to adapt, as we explored in shift 3. Instead, those moments of flow performance are clear, calm, and based on faith. We feel certain that we've already experimented with enough possible outcomes in preparation to deliver the best performance possible. When the curtain comes up, we firmly believe that everything we need is already within us.

Let Go of Results

Rory McIlroy burst onto the golf scene with his long drives and his big smile. In 2014, he was on top of the golfing world, having won the US Open and the PGA Championship and leading the tour in earnings. McIlroy practices his mental game diligently, making it a regular part of his training routine. After winning the British Open in 2014, he explained that in his self-talk during performance, he has developed the practice of focusing on just two words: *process* and *spot*. "With my long shots, I just wanted to stick to my process and stick to making good decisions, making good swings," he said in an interview. The word *spot* helped him with putting: "I was just picking a spot on the green and trying to roll [the ball] over my spot," he said. "I wasn't thinking about holing it. I wasn't thinking about what it would mean."¹⁷⁷ McIlroy knows he can experiment all he wants in preparation—with his swing, his nutrition, his weight lifting—but when it's time to perform, his focus needs to be squarely on trusting his process.

Unlike McIlroy, who looks the part of a golf pro, when James Harden entered the NBA, there were questions as to how his game would translate to

the next level—was he big enough, athletic enough, quick enough to excel? He burst onto the scene in Oklahoma City, where he became a fan favorite even on an absolutely loaded team. Harden's change-of-pace style of play when playing behind superstars Kevin Durant and Russell Westbrook made him a valuable asset as the team ascended to the NBA finals. After being swept by the juggernaut Miami Heat, however, management decided to trade Harden for financial reasons. Harden landed in Houston and became an absolute superstar. Today, he is a perennial MVP candidate and is seen as one of the best players in the world. How has Harden risen to such success? Well, success leaves clues.

In the 2019 NBA playoffs, Harden and the Houston Rockets were up 2–0 in the series against the Utah Jazz. As they entered a hostile arena in Utah for game 3, Harden struggled with his shots early and often. He didn't sink a single one of his first fifteen shots, setting a record for the most missed shots in a row to start a playoff game. One would think that would be the end of the story, and the end of the game for the Rockets, but it was not. Harden went on to score fourteen points in the fourth quarter and made a huge three-point shot with a little over a minute left in the game. He also added four rebounds, ten assists, and six steals. The Rockets won the game and took a commanding 3–0 lead in the series.

After the game, when ESPN's sideline reporter Cassidy Hubbarth asked about Harden's 0-for-15 shooting performance, his eyebrows went up and his eyes got bigger. "Ohh," he said. "For real? I went 0 for 15. I didn't know that. I don't remember."¹⁷⁸

A surprised Hubbarth asked for teammate Chris Paul's thoughts. "We don't play the percentages," Paul replied. "We don't look at how many shots you done missed or made."

"That's right," Harden chimed in.

"You put the work in," Paul continued. "That's what you work all summer for."

Hubbarth turned back to Harden and asked what he was thinking about while he was struggling, to which Harden responded, "Nothing. I was aggressive. They were doing a good job contesting my shots, and those are shots that I shoot every single day. I am going to live with them. In the fourth quarter they fell in, so game four, nothing changes. I am going to keep shooting the same shots."¹⁷⁹ Both Paul and Harden were in full trust mode,

and were unconcerned with their real-time results. For Harden, his process emphasizes getting buckets, and he wasn't going to stop trying to do that just because the results hadn't come yet.

I have often told basketball players that if they go zero for their first ten, they should keep believing in their process and trust that the eleventh will go in. If they don't believe that, they probably shouldn't have shot the first ten. In the midst of performance, you can't let short-term results shake your faith in your process.

Ask How

If you research the best salesperson of all time, John Patterson's name inevitably shows up. From 1884 to 1922, he built National Cash Register into a massively successful company.¹⁸⁰ By 1911, the company had sold one million machines, hired almost 6,000 employees, and cornered 95 percent of the US market. Patterson passed away in 1922, but in 1925 the company went on to become the largest public offering (\$55 million) in the history of the US stock market (at that time).

Patterson was known for developing a set of highly effective tools for sales. He was all about creating “how” systems for getting work done—providing sales seminars, developing sales scripts, even making salespeople wear white shirts and dark suits. His attention to the *how* of selling was so specific that his brother-in-law created a sixteen-page handbook called “How I Sell National Cash Registers.”¹⁸¹ The workbook became known as the “Primer” and was used to get salespeople ready to perform.

Other great salespeople also have succeeded by focusing almost obsessively on a process of how. Og Mandino, an insurance salesman best known for his immensely popular book, *The Greatest Salesman in the World*, provided ten chapters or “scrolls” focused on action, such as, “I will form good habits and become their slave.” In one of the most popular scrolls, Mandino writes, “I will act now”—eighteen times.¹⁸²

When it comes to performance, action matters, and therefore *how* matters. The *how* is defined by the elements of our process. Like Harden, we don't need to think our way out of a problem in performance; we need to *act* our way out. When a mistake occurs, you may have a tendency to try to fix things, but when you are performing, you should direct your attention to the next

viable action, the *how* of the next moment.

Diana Nyad is a great *how* performer. In 1975, Nyad swam around Manhattan (28 miles); in 1979, she swam from the Bahamas to Florida (102 miles); and in 2013, on her fifth attempt and at the age of sixty-four, she became the first person to swim from Cuba to Florida without the aid of a shark cage (110 miles).¹⁸³ Right before Nyad began her journey from Cuba to Florida, she looked at her long-time friend and coach, Bonnie Stoll, and repeated her mantra: “Find a way.”¹⁸⁴ Nyad knew her journey would be tough, filled with challenges known and unknown, but she trusted that her focus on finding a way—on the *how*—would give her the best chance of success.

When she was fifteen hours from Florida, she began to think about “reaching for the horizon” to keep her arms moving forward with good form.¹⁸⁵ Her *hows* helped her make history.

If-then and *why* thinking are huge for preparation—for theorizing, experimenting, and testing—but when performing, we want to be *how* thinkers. When we think in terms of *how*, we create a commitment to ourselves to find a solution. *How* guides us toward action. Even this book focuses on *how*: at the end of each shift are tangible tips for how to put each mindset to work.

Simon Sinek’s book *Start with Why* chronicles the importance of exploring *why*—the vision and purpose behind a course of action. What we often overlook is that he also focuses a lot on *how*. For instance, he points out that the CEO may set forth the *why* of an organization, but “the next level down, the HOW level, typically includes the senior executives who are inspired by the leader’s vision and know HOW to bring it to life.”¹⁸⁶ He continues, “In nearly every case of a person or an organization that has gone on to inspire people and do great things, there exists this special partnership between WHY and HOW.”¹⁸⁷ The *how* is where performance lives.

Trust in Teams and Organizations

In my research into some of the most successful businesses, the thread of experimenting and trusting the process showed up over and over again. You can see it across Silicon Valley, but no company has done the research on what makes an effective team—one that delivers great results consistently—with the thoroughness of Google. Looking for answers, Google spent more than two

years conducting over 200 interviews with its employees. The company looked at 250-plus attributes and broke down more than 180 teams. What the research uncovered is that “who is on a team matters less than how the team members interact, structure their work, and view contributions.”¹⁸⁸

Google found the following to be the most important attributes of its most successful teams:

1. **Psychological safety:** Can we take risks on this team without feeling insecure or embarrassed?
2. **Dependability:** Can we count on each other to do high-quality work on time?
3. **Structure and clarity:** Are goals, roles, and execution plans on our team clear?
4. **Meaning of work:** Are we working on something that is personally important for each of us?
5. **Impact of work:** Do we fundamentally believe that the work we’re doing matters?¹⁸⁹

What’s amazing about this breakdown is that the top three items—psychological safety, dependability, and structure and clarity—are all about trust, both interpersonal and process-oriented. The concept of psychological safety also helps us understand how trust can lead back to experimentation; it’s what allows Googlers to take risks and try new things. Creativity requires safety. So it’s no surprise the researchers found that psychological safety was of the utmost importance among the dynamics they studied, and that it underpins the other four.¹⁹⁰

Research has shown that building trust is not unique to Google. In 2016, researchers analyzed 112 studies that looked at more than 7,700 teams and found that intrateam trust was correlated to better performance. The more independent the team, the more important trust was to achieving performance success. While the research didn’t point to causation, the correlation between trust and performance is strong.¹⁹¹

On a great team, the team members will trust their process, *and* they will trust that every member has a job to do and has the ability to do that job. For example, a chef who trusts his or her process while in the kitchen has an understanding of how everyone on the team will show up when the dinner

rush hits, and will have faith in the team's ability to execute. Think about any partnership you are in—in your business or personal life—and you will realize that trust is paramount to success.

Research also has shown that more trusting employees bring a host of benefits to an organization: they are more cooperative and committed, they share more knowledge, and they rely less on counterproductive or dysfunctional behaviors.¹⁹² Employees who trust their managers and the top management team also show higher levels of task performance. Thus, organizational trust becomes an important mechanism for managers to influence workplace outcomes. In order for teams to perform up to their potential, trust needs to work in both inward and outward directions.

So, how can you help improve the performance of those around you while also eliciting their trust? Start with trusting yourself first, and then encourage members of your team to do the same.

Exercise Section

Experimenting until You Have a Process You Can Trust

Many elite basketball players say they have never taken a shot in a game that they hadn't taken at some point in their preparation. That's what allows them to trust in their training. For all the high performers mentioned in this shift, their experimental mind feeds their trusting mind. When it's game time, the mind will settle into the groove of how it's been trained, so let's look at how you can train yourself to experiment in preparation and trust in your performance.

Creative Calendar

Think back on Jerry Seinfeld's method of marking a calendar every day he wrote new content for his comedy act, to force himself to practice and experiment. What one activity makes the biggest difference in how often you create or experiment to improve your performance? Try the same calendar technique, focusing on setting aside time every day to devote to that crucial activity.

Bad Idea List

When my clients are struggling to innovate and take action, often I have them brainstorm a “bad idea list.” Many of us resist experimenting due to our concern about judgment from others. Verbalizing your ideas and framing them with low expectations will force you past that blockage, allowing you to “download” any ideas and experiment with them. Sometimes, one of those bad ideas might actually turn out to be a good one.

Try New Things

Try a new food. Do something you have never done before. Tinker with an idea you’ve had. Pick up a new hobby. Simply exposing yourself to experimentation throughout your daily life will help you experiment with your craft.

Six Thinking Hats

Six thinking hats is a technique that helps people experiment productively by separating thinking into six distinct functions. Edward de Bono developed the concept in 1985 as a way to challenge the brain to create. Use it to develop a process for experimenting and being creative in a way that generates results.¹⁹³

- **White Hat:** Focus on facts, data, and information.
- **Red Hat:** Look at problems or ideas from the perspective of your emotions, hunches, intuition, or gut reaction.
- **Black Hat:** Look at an idea’s potentially negative outcomes, and play devil’s advocate.
- **Yellow Hat:** Think optimistically, and look for possible benefits and upsides.
- **Green Hat:** Generate creative solutions for the problem by examining alternative ideas, different possibilities, and new perspectives (probably the most *experiment-oriented* of the hats).
- **Blue Hat:** Focus on process—of thinking, of creativity, of how you are using the hats (probably the most *trust-oriented* of the hats).

Doodle

Many of the best minds in our history have been doodlers. From Henry Ford to Steve Jobs and beyond, doodlers often experiment in their own way to learn a new approach to doing something. I recently doodled a new brand logo for my company while playing with my three-year-old daughter, which my designer ran with and made exponentially better. Give yourself some space to doodle, and see what comes to mind.

Plays in Your Back Pocket

Legendary NBA coach Gregg Popovich keeps a small sheet of plays that he can use late in a game if the score is close. Danny Ferry, who played for Coach Popovich and later worked in the San Antonio Spurs' front office, has said that Popovich leans heavily on those plays when it's time to cement a performance. A CEO once told me that he keeps reminders in his wallet of how he wants to show up on a day-to-day basis for his team. Before I record podcasts, on a sticky note that lists interview questions for my guests, I'll often write a little note to myself: *Stay curious*.

Take an index card or a sticky note and write down reminders that will help you trust your process. It can be one word, a set of mantras, a list of specific actions, or techniques to rely on in certain circumstances. No matter what you write, it should focus not on the result you're shooting for, but on *how* you plan to achieve it.

Write It Down

I worked with a high school lacrosse player who had an interesting way of reminding himself of the importance of trust when performing: he would take a black Sharpie, write the word *trust* on masking tape, and label his lacrosse stick, gloves, and shoes with it.

Many of the great performers I've studied or worked with create reminders of who they want to be when they are performing. Stephen Curry has written *I can do all things*—a passage from the Bible—on his shoes since he was in college. And remember Rory McIlroy and his two words: *process* and *spot*. He didn't write them down, but he may as well have.

What one or two words could you use to help you trust your process when

you are performing? Write them down, and post them where you can see them.

Expectation Scorecard

What do you expect of yourself when performing? It’s important to own your expectations. Too often, however, we think of them only as outcomes. Expectations are just as useful when they are process-oriented.

An expectation scorecard can help you quantify your process expectations and determine whether you are meeting them. Ask yourself these questions:

- What is one element of my process that is critical to a good performance?
- What is my expectation for executing that element?

Write down three to five expectations, and *after* your big moment—wait until after!—review your performance. Score yourself on a scale of 1 to 5 for each expectation, and then experiment to see how you can do a better job of meeting that expectation next time.

EXPECTATION	SCORE
Process expectation 1	/5
Process expectation 2	/5
Process expectation 3	/5
Process expectation 4	/5
Process expectation 5	/5

Can't Touch My Head

The biggest hindrance to trusting process is, of course, doubt. We begin to direct our attention and our self-talk toward results; we obsess over how we're not executing or performing well; and we begin to question the process we are supposed to be relying on. It can be helpful to train ourselves to override our brain when this happens.

Try this: while saying out loud, "I can't touch my head," touch your head over and over again. Your inner belief that you *can* touch your head, because you are touching it, will override the thought in the moment that you can't. This type of exercise can train you to shut down negative self-talk or distractions.

Control What You Can Control

When we trust in our process, what we really are focused on is controlling what we can control: our own actions. "Control what you can control" has become a mantra for professional athletes as they prime their minds for the uncertainties of a performance. Simply listing all the things that are in your control and all the things that are out of your control during a performance can be extremely helpful. It reminds us why we rely on our process.

Create a table like the one below, and list specific elements of your performance for each column. Before a performance, when you find yourself getting distracted by things outside your control, study the list of things within your control to reset your thinking.

WITHIN MY CONTROL	OUTSIDE MY CONTROL

□ □ □

Want to be a great performer? The more you can appreciate the experimentation and iteration stage and how it frees you up to trust the process, the better off you'll be. There are so many ways to experiment! Find what works for you, for your craft, and then experiment with experimenting.

We should never allow ourselves to become set in our ways when it comes to how we prepare. The more we invite new ideas and approaches, the greater our trust in our process will be. That trust fills the gap between potential and outcome. When it's time to let go of new ideas and refocus away from results, find your inner faith that whatever will happen, will happen. That's where clarity overwhelms clutter. It's where successful performance lives.

It's up to you to make the shift.

The New Zealand All Blacks are to rugby as the New York Yankees are to baseball—from the beginning, one of the most dominant teams in the sport. They are fierce, intimidating, and united. But how did New Zealand, an island nation with a population of about 4.8 million people, become the epicenter of rugby?

James Kerr, in his incredible book *Legacy*, went inside the locker room to study the All Blacks' success. What stands out is their intentional culture building. They don't sacrifice character for talent, which shows in their "no dickheads" rule and in their ritual of sweeping the locker rooms after road games to leave them better than they found them. The same focus on intentional growth shows up in how they prepare and perform as well.

Former assistant coach Wayne Smith describes the team's approach as follows:

The training, decision-making wise, should be harder than the game. . . . By throwing all sorts of problem-solving situations at them and randomizing situations, we found we were getting better long-term learning. If you are not over-extending yourself, you're not going to get much learning—there's no point in ducking the challenges.¹⁹⁴

The idea is to make the preparation so intense that the brain and body learn how to seamlessly perform the same tasks when under pressure. The All Blacks embrace the power of discomfort in their training, which helps them comfortably execute on game day. They call this the "Train to Win" system.

The All Blacks' intentional approach to developing the performance mind is unique. It uses the concept of Red Head versus Blue Head: Having a Red Head means you're HOT—heated, overwhelmed, and tense—which is not optimal for performance. Having a Blue Head, on the other hand, allows you

to focus on ACT—alternatives, consequences, and task behaviors.¹⁹⁵ The All Blacks stress finding ways to get into the Blue Head so they can deliver when performing.

How?

The intensity of their training offers an opportunity to work out the Red Head in preparation. In an interview during the 2019 World Cup, team member Matt Todd explained that during a one-week break in games, they would be pushing themselves to their personal limits: “Some boys may be doing some personal bests this week. . . . You’ve got to make training as hard as you possibly can[,] and the more you’re tested there[,] the better prepared you are for the game. . . . We get put under immense pressure.”¹⁹⁶

Come game day, though, the All Blacks have to shift away from putting pressure on themselves so they can handle the pressure of the game. They have to make sure they are in Blue Head. To help them make the shift, the All Blacks have perhaps the best pregame ritual in sport: the haka. The haka is a dance with chanting that stems from a historic ritual of the indigenous Maori people as they prepared for battle. It’s fierce, emotional, and charismatic. Facing their opponents, the rugby players slap their hands, use aggressive body movements, yell, and make faces. If you have never watched the haka, I encourage you to check it out on YouTube. “The All Blacks use the Haka to reconnect with their fundamental purpose,” Kerr explains, “to connect to the core of their culture, to summon their ancestors up from the earth to aid them in their battle, to intimidate the competition, and to bond with one another.”¹⁹⁷

For the All Blacks, the haka serves as a reminder: They are about to perform. It’s time to let go of the discomfort of preparation and get comfortable with what’s about to happen. They know their teammates have their back. They know they’ve prepared with such intensity that they’ve expanded their limits, making whatever comes next seem almost easy by comparison.

What the All Blacks are working toward with their Blue Head approach is an inner calm that allows them to relax into their performance while maintaining their intensity. They feel comfortable in their environment. Being comfortable doesn’t mean they completely avoid feeling nervous, but it does mean they’ll be able to overcome those feelings and move past them.

Think about a performance you’ve seen that was difficult to watch. Maybe

it was a high school student delivering a speech for the first time or a colleague who was way out of his or her comfort zone during a presentation. How would you describe the person at that moment? Awkward, maybe? Tense? Nervous? The discomfort probably was evident in the person's body, which might have seemed overwhelmed by every stress and strain of the performance. Have you ever delivered a performance in that state of mind, where you struggled to settle into your abilities, your decisions, your judgment?

Now compare that to one or two of the best performances you've seen. Those performers probably seemed at ease, positively energetic, and smooth in their delivery or actions. What's their secret?

That calm command in the moment would be tough to achieve if those successful performers hadn't pushed themselves to the limit in preparation. That's their secret: they earn the right to be comfortable by first going through the fires of discomfort. When we step into discomfort in preparation, we strive for our personal best and push ourselves to new heights. We embrace the intensity. We challenge ourselves for the sake of growth, putting strain and stress on our bodies and minds so we can build up the grit necessary to eventually handle the pressure of performance.

Discomfort isn't simply about work ethic. I've seen people with a strong work ethic become very comfortable in their training. Their growth slows down, they become complacent, and those top performers start to slide. You can show up every day to do your job, to train, to put in the hours of practice—and still not take it to the level of an elite performer in preparation. They push themselves to do things that their brain is saying are impossible. Being uncomfortable is a never-ending cycle that begins anew every time their performance ends.

You need both: discomfort and comfort. With discomfort, you will push yourself to expand your sense of what's possible. With comfort, you will relax your body and mind while maintaining a productive level of intensity. Without discomfort in preparation, we limit our growth. Without comfort in performance, we struggle to bring out our best selves, our greatest abilities.

Let's take a deep dive into how stress and strain in preparation can lead to relaxed calm when performing.

Experiencing the Uncomfortable Expands Our Possibilities

Hasidic rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski is an octogenarian with a long white beard. As a psychiatrist, he specializes in substance abuse and has written more than sixty books, many of them on personal growth, resilience, and living our best lives. To describe how we should approach stress, Rabbi Twerski uses the analogy of the lobster:

A lobster is a soft, mushy animal that lives inside of a rigid shell. That rigid shell does not expand. . . . As the lobster grows, that shell becomes very confining, and the lobster feels itself under pressure and uncomfortable. . . . It casts off the shell and produces a new one. Well, eventually, that shell becomes very uncomfortable. . . . The lobster repeats this numerous times. The stimulus for the lobster to be able to grow is that it feels uncomfortable.¹⁹⁸

As Twerski points out, much of our society is set up to help people when they are uncomfortable, when in fact what those people need to do in times of stress is use that adversity—their discomfort—to grow.

Athletes who want to grow understand that in order to get stronger physically, they can't do the same reps every single day—they need to break down the body in order for muscle to build. It is uncomfortable, even painful, and they will be sore the next day, too. Discomfort in preparation is the Navy SEAL who goes through Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S) training and Hell Week. Discomfort in preparation is the guitar player who plays until she gets blisters that turn into callouses, and cramps in her hands from trying to master difficult chords. Discomfort is common for novices who are just learning, but it is just as important for experts who are doing whatever they can to gain an edge or take their performance to the next level.

Like the lobster, great performers know that marginal gains—and some of our most important mental and physical strengths—lie within the depths of discomfort.

Now that you know the importance of discomfort in preparation, how can you leverage it? Through habit. Create habits that force you to fight complacency in preparation. Remember, complacency is the enemy of success. Rory McIlroy, who is one of the best golfers in the world and who was

mentioned in shift 5, built a practice facility in his backyard designed after some of the scariest, hardest holes in the world.¹⁹⁹ He makes it a habit to spend time there when he's not on tour. Paxton Baker, who was a guest on my podcast, was president of BET and is a minority owner of the Washington Nationals. At my office to record the podcast, he had a choice of going down a flight of stairs or up a flight of stairs to use the bathroom. He chose to take the stairs going up, saying, "I always try to do the more difficult thing first." He has made it a habit to embrace discomfort.

You can be intentional about inviting discomfort into your life. Move toward it—that's where you'll find room for growth.

Discomfort Is a Given When Learning Something New

I was fifteen years old when I got my learner's permit. After failing the test the first time, I was excited to get behind the wheel—but I still remember the discomfort and anxiety of pulling the car onto the road. My mom was with me at the time, and we took back roads to avoid the highway. I gripped the wheel, my knuckles white. I can remember my mom telling me to ease off the wheel and to stop stomping on the brakes when we approached a red light. But I was too uncomfortable to let go.

The next day, my dad told me I would be driving to a family gathering. My excitement quickly turned to nervousness as I looked outside at the torrential downpour. Even worse, I knew there was no way I could avoid the highway on this trip. With the windshield wipers swooshing back and forth, I crept along to the on-ramp. I merged cautiously onto the highway but stayed in the right lane. "Why are you making me do this?" I cried out to my dad. "Why don't you just drive?"

"Now is as good a time as ever to learn," he replied. "You are doing fine. Just relax." My dad knew I wasn't going to actually relax, but he understood that there was no way to become comfortable without working through the discomfort of learning something new. I had to accept being uncomfortable in my preparation if I ever wanted to be comfortable in my performance with a vehicle.

Do you remember the first time you took the wheel of a car? How about the first time you tried anything new? Whatever that new thing was, I'll bet the feeling was awkward and perhaps even terrifying.

The power of a learner's permit can be transformational. In his book *The Gift of Adversity*, Dr. Norman Rosenthal quotes Elise Hancock, former editor in chief of *Johns Hopkins Magazine*:

Remember the many times you've tackled something new. Think hard about how you struggled at the beginning—when you first learned to drive, to kick a soccer ball, or to read a book. In just the same way, when it comes to writing, you're learning—so give yourself a learner's permit. As with many things we fear, it gets easier as you go along. The process may seem like a mess, but all that matters in the end is the finished product.²⁰⁰

I recently observed my four-year-old getting on a bike for the first time. After falling and bloodying his elbow, he would constantly remind me to “hold on” with him. It's human nature to be scared and uncomfortable when we try new things. As a parent, I had to navigate when to keep him safe and when to let him go so he could experience the discomfort that comes from falling. It was a challenging experience for him *and* his parent!

It's true—we do become more comfortable over time. For some things, like driving or riding a bike, we can stay there in that comfort zone. Our performance becomes rote, and that's fine. But to truly deliver in our most important performances in life, we have to keep finding our way back to the discomfort of being a beginner.

Expand Your Sense of What Is Possible

Kyle Korver understands the lobster analogy as well as any athlete I know. He is among the all-time best in three-point shots made, once set a record for most consecutive basketball games with a three-point shot (90), and has helped set a team record for wins. And yet in 2003, he was just the fifty-first overall pick in the NBA draft, which means he was passed over by every other team until he was finally picked by the New Jersey Nets. After playing solidly for several teams over the years, he was traded to the Atlanta Hawks in 2012 in a deal that didn't make too many headlines. However, in Atlanta he became an NBA All-Star and started setting records.

The summer before he made the All-Star team, Kyle could be found in

Santa Barbara, California, preparing for the upcoming season. At thirty-three years old, despite having already made millions, he was not focused on a summer of comfort. Instead, he was focused on the one thing that would soon unlock his potential and contribute to a magical season—*misogi*.

Misogi is a Japanese Shinto ritual of purification that often includes physical activity and then washing in an icy waterfall. In martial arts, some use the concept of misogi to develop one's center and to shift the mind before training. Korver's misogi—led by Marcus Elliott, the founder of the Peak Performance Project (P3), which has been at the forefront of sports science in baseball, basketball, football, and soccer—was a bit different. “This is about testing your abilities in a foreign environment. . . . It's not a ride at Disneyland or a Tough Mudder,” Elliott explains. “And it's really . . . hard. You have a 50 percent chance of success, at best.”²⁰¹

For their test, Korver and his friends chose to take turns passing an 85.2-pound stone and a 68.5-pound stone to each other while walking five kilometers—along the seafloor. They would take a breath, dive down, pick up the rock, “run” with it until they couldn't breathe, and then drop it and surface so the next person could take his turn. They wore fifteen-pound weights, which helped them walk underwater but made the task even more difficult. The goal is to “radically expand your sense of what's possible,” writes journalist Charles Bethea, who joined in on the underwater relay.²⁰²

Reflecting on his first misogi—a nine-hour, twenty-five-mile open-water paddleboard trip from the Channel Islands to Santa Barbara—Korver says, “Excuses have to be dropped. Your mind has to focus. And you have to train that mindset. Everything falls into place by doing the smallest thing perfectly. That lesson from the misogi carried over to my shooting.”²⁰³ Korver was becoming comfortable with the uncomfortable, and it paid dividends when the time came to perform.

But this is something we have to literally train our brains to do. We have to will our body to move through the responses of fear and adversity so we can control those responses. That idea was explained perfectly when Bethea interviewed Douglas Fields, a neuroscientist and author of *Electric Brain*, who talks about how to “exploit the biochemistry of novelty”:

The molecular processes that are engaged during a novel—stressful or traumatic—experience get turned on, and everything gets stamped into

long-term memory. . . . This effect can be used to advantage in training, [and that] is what this Japanese method is doing: expanding your limits by strengthening forebrain control.²⁰⁴

As Nelson Mandela wrote in a letter to his wife while in prison, “Difficulties break some men but make others.”²⁰⁵ That said, it’s important to recognize two things: First, these misogi exercises are one-day, one-time efforts. Nobody could push themselves this hard very often without suffering some serious repercussions. Second, although the efforts of Korver and his friends were hard and novel, they were not physically beyond the capabilities of such an incredibly fit and healthy group. Like the vast majority of people, I would be hard-pressed to do these activities for more than an hour without wanting to die.

The key is to occasionally push yourself beyond what you believe are your limits, in order to expand your sense of what you are truly capable of. I know a writer who had a pretty steady writing pace every week. One week, after being inspired by another writer’s productivity, she decided to more than double the number of words she wrote, just to see what she was capable of. She made it, and she was pretty happy with the results, although she worked crazy hours to make it happen. But afterward, she was able to comfortably increase her productivity by 15 percent.

Where could you push yourself to the limit in the short term, to expand your sense of possibility in the long term?

Use Discomfort to Build Specific Skills in Training

I have interviewed four different Navy SEALs on my podcast—because they are elite-level in preparation and performance—and they all talk about how grueling the training is. The purpose of the training is to thin out the herd, to ensure that only the most mentally, physically, and emotionally tough people become SEALs. Their experience is also a good example of practicing the performance mind, because they are actually performing during their training; they are critiqued as they are pushed to the brink. Many SEALs talk about the importance of disassociation to help them perform under the intense pressure of Hell Week. Disassociation is the ability to disengage from one’s body and focus on something other than pain.²⁰⁶ Marathon runners, long-

distance swimmers, and many other pain-based athletes use this technique. But you have to build that skill during training if you want to be able to leverage it in performance.

Alecia Beth Moore is a singer, songwriter, dancer, and actress. She spent her childhood working hard as a gymnast and had dreams of making the Olympics. When that didn't happen, she changed her focus to music. You may know Alecia as pop star Pink.

Pink is a unique performer, and she is always looking to challenge the status quo. She has become well-known for her aerial stunts, hanging from objects hundreds of feet off the ground while belting out a hit song. Pink studied aerial silks with one of the supporting dancers for famed singer Cher, who started Pink's training at a jungle gym: she had Pink hang upside down and then repeatedly punched her in the stomach.²⁰⁷ To be able to sing while inverted, Pink would need incredible control of her abdominal muscles and diaphragm. The work that Pink puts in with her coach is what allows her to deliver incredible performances.

Using discomfort in training for a specific skill or in preparing for a level of discomfort while performing doesn't mean you have to do something as physically painful as a Navy SEAL or Pink does. Some intentional performers have used the act of driving as an opportunity to train their mind and get back into an uncomfortable state. Take Gary Player, a legendary golfer who has twenty-four PGA Tour wins, has designed over 400 golf courses, and has written more than thirty-six books. He credits his ability to be comfortable mentally with the uncomfortable as one of his unfair advantages—and one that he helped develop using a clever approach. Player knew that golf is a game of patience: golfers sometimes have to play extremely long rounds, have to wait for opponents to hit, and get backed up when slow golfers are ahead of them. If they become impatient, antsy, or agitated, it will throw their game off. So when driving his car on the highway, Player would intentionally get behind slow drivers. He was training his performance mind, building the skill of patience, so that when he got on the course, he could be comfortable.²⁰⁸

And Don't Forget to Rest

For years, NBA teams would have morning walk-throughs on game day, when the players would go over their plan and strategies for the evening's game.

After the game, especially when they are on the road, many players are too amped up to head back to the hotel to sleep, so they get a late dinner or go out. The result often was a morning walk-through with players who were working on little sleep and didn't want to be in the arena. Their attention was inconsistent at best, and their ability to retain information was minimal. Today, in 2020, almost every NBA team has abandoned the practice completely. What caused the change? Our better understanding of the value of sleep.

In their book *Peak Performance*, authors Brad Stulberg and Steve Magness share their “secret to sustainable success”: stress + rest = growth.²⁰⁹ Stress, or discomfort, is necessary—but without rest, the growth may not happen.

Over the past decade, napping has become a cultural norm in the NBA. “If you nap every game day, all those hours add up and it allows you to get through the season better,”²¹⁰ Hall of Fame point guard Steve Nash once said. “I want to improve at that, so by the end of the year, I feel better.” And Adam Silver, the NBA's deputy commissioner in 2011, described napping as a league-wide given: “Everyone in the league office knows not to call players at 3 p.m. It's the player nap.”²¹¹ Players need to counteract the late nights, the intense workouts, the grueling 82-game seasons. If they want the stress to turn into growth, they have to make time to rest.

Stanford University conducted a study on the positive impact of sleep on basketball performance. The players involved in the study were encouraged to sleep ten hours each night, abstain from drinking coffee and alcohol, and take daytime naps when they were unable to get a full night's sleep.²¹² The study uncovered positive outcomes for the athletes as a result of the intervention: their sprint times improved, their shooting accuracy and free throw percentages went up, their fatigue levels decreased, and they reported better performance in games. Today, many professional sports teams have sleep doctors on their payroll.

It can be especially important to rest right before a big performance. Pitchers in Major League Baseball in particular have a mentally tough job; on the mound, the spotlight is bright. C. J. Wilson, a dominant MLB pitcher, said in a 2011 ESPN article:

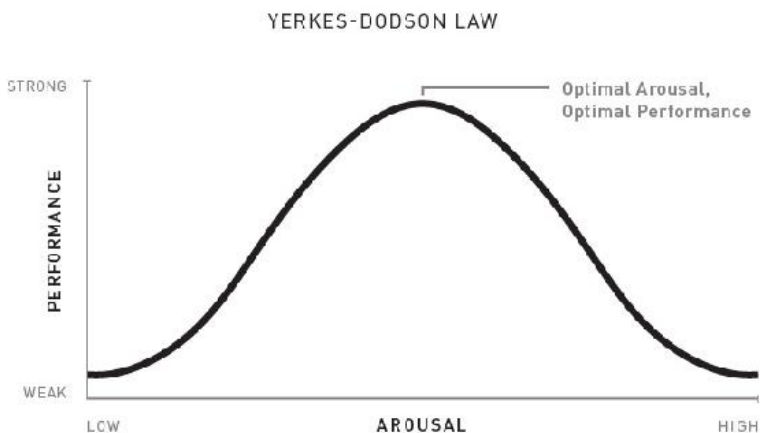
You want to save up your mental energy for the game. Like for me, I don't want to be too agitated during the day. I try not to do a bunch of

stuff and take naps. I'll get up and eat breakfast and take a nap afterwards. Then I'll eat lunch and take another nap. . . . I conserve everything that I have.²¹³

Pros know how to balance their energy. It's essential. But we all need rest—actual sleep as well as regular breaks from the rigorous work we do. We need to recover from the stress of our preparation, especially when we are focused on the discomfort of pushing ourselves to expand our limits and our sense of what's possible. Are you getting the rest you need?

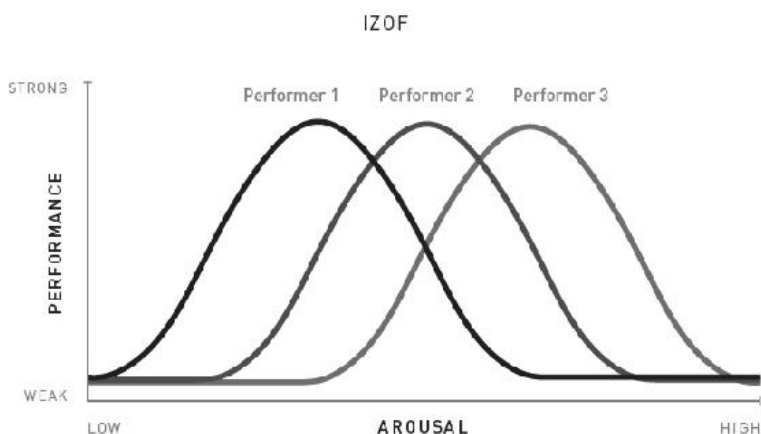
Getting Comfortable without Losing Your Edge

In sport psychology, one of the most popular and longest-standing theories of peak performance is the Yerkes-Dodson law, developed by Robert Yerkes and John Dodson in 1908. Put simply, it maps our level of stress (using the more accurate psychological term *arousal*) to the quality of our performance. This theory suggests the optimal level of arousal in performance is not too high and not too low—a midline that balances a certain level of comfort with a level of energy and edge that keeps us at our peak, especially mentally.²¹⁴



What's interesting, though, is that there isn't one perfect point of balance for all tasks or for all people. Your "optimal arousal" depends on a lot of factors unique to you, your situation, and the type of performance you are expected to deliver. So in the 1970s, sport psychologist Yuri Hanin proposed a related

idea: the individual zones of optimal functioning (IZOF), a concept that is used to help athletes become aware of where their optimal zone lies.²¹⁵ The IZOF theory suggests that each athlete has a different level of anxiety, arousal, or stress needed to perform, and it's up to the athlete to learn how to regulate that anxiety for performance. These differences can be based on the individual's sport, position, or psychological profile. For example, a lacrosse player may differ from a golfer; a kicker in football may differ from a linebacker; and tennis great Roger Federer may differ from his rival Novak Djokovic. Having worked with athletes for over a decade, I have been amazed by how many athletes are unaware of their optimal zone—and by how different their approach becomes once they become aware.



To be clear, the optimal zone is all about comfort. If an athlete performs better with more anxiety, it's because the individual is comfortable with that anxiety and perceives that stress in an optimal way. Beyoncé said in her documentary *Year of 4*, “I like that nervousness. I don’t like it in the moment, but I know that it just means that I want it—it means that it’s challenging to me, and I am doing the right job. You can’t be too comfortable and too confident.”²¹⁶ Beyoncé’s interpretation of her nerves is her interpretation alone—nobody else gets to decide how she processes her thoughts and emotions. But she knows that discomfort is part of pushing boundaries and improving in preparation, and when she feels those nerves in a performance, she knows how to interpret them so they help her rather than hinder her. The nerves don’t take her out of her comfort zone; instead they remind her that she cares

deeply about her performance.

When you are comfortable—in your optimal zone—performing seems easy. You have greater clarity. You are in the flow state. Obstacles look like opportunities. You are not worried about how others are perceiving you; you are simply directing your attention to whatever is required of you. The top performers are comfortable because, in their optimal zone, they are able to avoid or overcome mistakes. That’s why the average viewer will rarely notice a mishap on Broadway, a wrong guitar note at a show, or a missed word in a speech. Think about the best performance you have ever delivered. How comfortable were you with what transpired?

On the flip side, performing in a state of discomfort can lead to burnout, poor decision-making, feeling overwhelmed—even injury, if your performance is physical. And even if your IZOF is on the high end of stress and intensity, it’s important to understand how too much discomfort for too long can eventually harm you. We’ve all heard about the dangers of stress. A research roundup published in *Harvard Business Review* revealed that stress is the cause of 60–80 percent of workplace accidents; that people with “stress-producing” bosses have a higher rate of heart disease; and that long-term stress leads to disengagement, which leads to lower productivity and profitability.²¹⁷ Get clear on what discomfort means to you in preparation and what comfort means to you in performance. Create awareness and intention around both, and you will be able to leverage the framework properly.

There’s a saying that is often applied to performers, although the source is vague: when we have butterflies, it’s up to us to get those butterflies to fly in formation. So it doesn’t matter if you are hyped up or calmed down; what matters is that you are comfortable once the performance begins. If you don’t have that awareness, you will simply let the environment, the opponent, or the overall situation hijack your mind, your focus, and your comfort. Find your comfort zone, and you’ll be closer to your ideal performance mind.

Adjusting Your Perceived Stress by Being More Authentic

Just as each of us has a different IZOF, we each have a different relationship with stress, either because of our psychological makeup or due to the realities of our lives. Consequently, we can interpret a new stressor as a challenge (often positive, sometimes negative) or a threat (always negative). Researchers

wondering how different perspectives on stress affected people's ability to perform a physical task assessed 127 undergraduates. Using various psychological testing, they put people into either a "challenge" group or a "threat" group. Then they had them perform some golf putting tasks (they were all novice golfers). According to the published results, "The challenge group performed more accurately, reported more favorable emotions, and displayed more effective gaze, putting kinematics, and muscle activity than the threat group."²¹⁸

You can find a Perceived Stress Scale almost anywhere online. It's usually a simple 10-to-14-item questionnaire that allows you to score your current state of perceived stress. If you score especially high, you'll have a hard time responding or performing well, regardless of the environment or situation—especially if something unexpected happens. You might also face performance struggles if your score is too low. So, what do you do?

Throughout this book, I've shared mindfulness techniques, such as meditation, that can help us control our levels of stress when appropriate. In the next section, as in shift 5, I offer advice on controlling what we can rather than trying to control what we can't, a sure-fire stress inducer. But in terms of finding a state of comfort for performance, one of the most important steps we can take is to work on our authenticity.

Francesca Gino is a behavioral scientist at Harvard Business School. She found that when people are inauthentic, their stress levels increase and their performance takes a hit.²¹⁹ Consider the how-tos I've shared that are designed to help you find your natural performance skills, your personal expectations for yourself, and more. The goal is to find your authentic self in performance, because this is where you will be most comfortable.

Bill George, who wrote the book *Authentic Leadership*, helped bring authenticity to the forefront in 2003. George defined authentic leaders as genuine, moral, and character based, and he makes the connection between authenticity and clarity.²²⁰ Authentic leaders make sure to know who they are so that they can know what to do. The same can be said for authentic performers. If your inner self is based on preparation that includes developing strong character and a sense of integrity, then the outcome of your performance will not define you, thus leading to more comfort in performance. Authentic performers are comfortable because they know their performance is what they do, not who they are.

It's important to point out that authenticity and comfort are not rigid or without doubts. Comfort in one's authenticity doesn't provide a free pass to be careless and reckless of consequences, or to be complacent. Instead, it provides an opportunity for you to show your real and genuine self—to be OK with who that person is, and to be vulnerable so you can take action and execute. Comfort is an inner experience. As you approach performance, it's important to be authentically comfortable and satisfied with your preparation so you can open yourself up in order to show up fully. Know who you are and what you have done, and take comfort in your ability to perform with comfort.

Maybe It's OK to Be "High Maintenance"

Like Beyoncé, many pop stars over the years have been called "divas." But if you look closely, you might change your interpretation of their behavior. Their demands may just be an attempt to get as comfortable as possible—regardless of how obscure their asks may seem. These performers know they are limited in what they can control once onstage, so they get as many ducks in a row as possible beforehand. That way, their comfort and confidence won't dip if things go awry.

Beyoncé's husband, rapper and producer Jay-Z, requests a specific scented candle in his suite and asks that the temperature remain set to 71 degrees at all times. He also doesn't allow his staff to ask him for concert tickets, so he can avoid the stress of making that happen. Madonna brings her furniture on tour with her and has a personal chef to ensure she eats right. Katy Perry requests specific flowers and food. Lady Gaga insists on having white leather couches and water at room temperature. Jennifer Lopez requests all-white dressing rooms when recording a video. Justin Bieber banned music by his ex-girlfriend, Selena Gomez, from being played in his dressing room.²²¹ From the outside looking in, these requests seem high maintenance, but I see them differently. I see high-level performers being intentional about their needs and setting their mind for comfortable performance.

Where do you need to be more focused on getting your needs met prior to a performance?

In his autobiography, Rafael Nadal compares himself to Clark Kent. He believes that before beginning a match, he has to transform from civilian to superman. The transformation is not simply whipping off a pair of glasses and exchanging a suit for tennis whites, though. It's a process, a routine that primes him for performance.

Forty-five minutes before a match, you'll find Nadal in a freezing cold shower:

Under the cold shower I enter a new space in which I feel my power and resilience grow. I'm a different man when I emerge. I'm activated. I'm in "the flow." . . . Nothing else exists but the battle ahead. I put on my earphones and [listen] to music. It sharpens that sense of flow, removes me further from my surroundings.

Nadal's routine moves forward through many steps, but he is quick to point out that it isn't superstition. "If it were superstition, why would I keep doing the same thing over and over whether I win or lose? It's a way of placing myself in a match, ordering my surroundings to match the order I seek in my head," he explains.²²² Nadal doesn't believe that these actions will dictate the outcome—just that they will give him the best opportunity to succeed. The nuance is subtle but important. Nadal's routine is what allows him to become comfortable in an intense and stressful performance environment; it fortifies his mind and his body.

Some of the best basketball shooters of all time have mastered the power of systems and routines. Hall of Famer Ray Allen was meticulous about getting himself comfortable. Allen would practice his performance mind on the treadmill, trying to lower his heart rate and remain calm and comfortable even while he was pushing his body. Top-class players know how to be intentional with every step they take leading up to game time. The pros warm up their bodies and their minds, so they are ready when the game starts.

When we are routine-oriented, we create our own comfortable environment, no matter how ever-changing our performance situations might be. Routine is not just for preperformance; it also can be massively helpful when we need to be comfortable during performance. NBA players have long mastered the power of a routine while shooting free throws. Try watching the free throws of one particular player, and you'll notice the same small

behaviors, the same adjustments, the same posture. Basketball players practice that routine and leverage it on every free throw—no matter whether the shot is taken in a preseason, regular season, or playoff game. Routine allows them to be comfortable every single time they step to the line.

Tony Robbins, the famous motivational speaker, will bounce on a trampoline backstage before a big event to get himself comfortable and energized. When it's time to go onstage, he will walk up a few steps, do a fist pump, spin in a circle, and then smack his hands on his chest. Only then does he run out to the crowd while clapping his hands.²²³ Robbins is one of the most influential performers of the past thirty years, and his ability to get himself comfortable certainly helps.

Dr. Sanam Hafeez, a clinical psychologist and neuropsychologist, writes, “Emotionally and cognitively and executively the brain has established a lot of pathways. The more you do something[,] the more ingrained it becomes in neural pathways. . . . Change is an upheaval of many things and the brain has to work to fit it into an existing framework.”²²⁴ Routine allows us to establish certain pathways so we can rely on muscle memory when our brains and bodies are being overloaded with stimulation. Within that routine, a performer can find comfort, calm both mind and body, and connect with the authentic performance he or she wants to deliver.

These benefits extend to teams. Just think of the locker room chants, how teams enter the arena together, how they huddle before play, and more. James Kerr, author of the book on the New Zealand rugby team, interviewed Owen Eastwood, a team culture expert who helped the All Blacks get clear on how they wanted to show up. When discussing the haka, Eastwood explained that “rituals are key for reinforcing the emotional glue.”²²⁵

It's important to point out that one can be both routine-oriented and adaptable. There is a time to trust your routine (for example, when you are doing a closed-ended action like free throw shooting) and a time to be adaptable (for example, when a point guard is running a play for his team). Performance is a combination of the two. Both competencies live in the performance mind.

No matter your process, it's important to be aware of how your body language impacts your comfort. Be intentional. Be aware. If you aren't comfortable enough in performance, then changes need to be made.

So, what are the essential elements of being comfortable in performance?

It's all about finding what works for you. Where are you on the IZOF spectrum? What systems and actions are you putting in place on game day to ensure you're most *you* for your performance? Once all eyes are on you, no matter how you feel or what's going on in your head, you'll need to work at interpreting it all as part of being optimally comfortable.

Exercise Section

Getting Comfortable—with the Uncomfortable and the Comfortable

Greatness is not easy. It's not a spectator sport. It requires intentional discomfort and comfort when our bodies and minds may be pushing to go in a different direction. The greats put systems, routines, and habits in place to ensure they are showing up the way they want for preparation and performance, and they set tripwires to ensure they are staying on course.

What routines and habits can you insert into your process? Prepare with discomfort, and perform with comfort. Fight the urge to do the opposite. Learn to become comfortable—at the right moments—with the uncomfortable *and* the comfortable. Here are some ideas for how you can do just that.

Stop List

People today have become activity junkies—jumping from one task to the next to fill our time. Often this lets us avoid working on those things that are uncomfortable, such as starting a new exercise regimen or addressing a specific weakness. Activity gives us comfort, which is exactly what we don't need in preparation. For instance, updating Instagram may make you feel comfortable by giving you an excuse to avoid the gym.

Pick three activities that you could stop doing this week to make a positive impact on your future performance.

Stress + Rest = Growth

Anybody can leverage this formula from Stulberg and Magness's book, *Peak*

Performance. To make sure you are giving enough focus to each important element, make a list of all the areas that you think need more stress in preparation—areas where you should be pushing yourself, expanding your limits or what you believe is possible during preparation. Also for each area, what rest is required? How will the two combined—stress and rest—help you grow in specific ways?

STRESS	REST	GROWTH

Disassociation

If your preparation or performance is grueling—physically, mentally, or emotionally, for whatever reason—you may be overwhelmed by your focus on the discomfort you’re facing in the moment. In these instances, disassociation may be a helpful tool in your toolbox.

You can disassociate by singing a song or imagining yourself in a different place, like the beach, to take you away from the obsessive thoughts that can occur when you are in pain. The disassociation can help you get through the moments when you are at your limit, and help you relax.

Polarity Map

This book leverages the power of polarity and the idea that there are benefits to opposites. The polarity map is a great tool for better understanding the

power of any of the shifts, but I especially like to use it with uncomfortable and comfortable. For each, list the benefits, the potential downsides (especially when used at the wrong time), the actions you must take to leverage the full benefits, and warning signs that you may be slipping toward one of the downsides. This type of analysis will help you embrace discomfort and focus your energy on becoming comfortable when it's time.

UNCOMFORTABLE	COMFORTABLE
Benefits	Benefits
Potential Downsides	Potential Downsides
Actions to Leverage the Benefits	Actions to Leverage the Benefits
Warning Signs to Avoid the Downsides	Warning Signs to Avoid the Downsides

Music Playlist

Create a comfort playlist that helps you get ready to perform. This technique, although one of the simplest, is often overlooked by people who aren't athletes. Music can have a massive impact on our mood, giving us energy or calming us down. Be intentional about the songs you choose, and make sure your music is in alignment with your IZOF.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation is a great way to shift from discomfort to comfort—and a great way to help yourself fall asleep, by the way. This technique requires you to bring awareness to each part of your body, one at a time, and to be conscious of your mind's tendency to wander as well as the power of your breath to bring you back to focus. The result is full-body relaxation and a sense of calm. I've created a progressive muscle relaxation script that you can find on my website strongskills.co/book. I recommend reciting the script a few times through so that you can leverage the technique when you need it.

Get Comfortable with the Uncomfortable in Everyday Activities

Try Gary Player's technique for developing his ability to be comfortable with the uncomfortable. Just like in a performance, so much can happen while driving that can take you off-course—distractions like other drivers, the radio, traffic, your cell phone. One of my clients intentionally backs his car into every space as a reminder to do the uncomfortable things first and the more comfortable things second. How can you use driving as an opportunity to cultivate your comfortable performance mind? What makes you crazy when you're driving? Expose yourself to it even more until you get comfortable with something you typically find uncomfortable.

BTT to Calm Your Mind and Body

When doing closed-ended tasks (putting, pitching, taking a penalty shot, etc.), increase your comfort by directing attention to those things you can control. Some of my golf clients have used the acronym BTT to help:

- **Breathe:** Make sure to control your breathing so your body can relax.
- **Tempo:** Take control of the speed of your routine, whether it's talking or moving or raising your arms to swing a club.
- **Target:** Choose a specific spot, and lock onto it to control your focus and attention.

This is a great technique for athletes, but any performer can use it in moments of high stress, especially when that person has to perform a task he or she has performed many times.

Comfort Checklist

One of my favorite times to observe clients is the period from two hours before their performance until the start of the performance, whether on the field at pro soccer games, on the sideline at college football games, or on the floor of pro basketball games. This can be an incredible opportunity to watch elite performers prep their performance mind, especially through their unique routines. What can you do to prime your mind for comfort? Create a checklist of personal routines that help you become comfortable on “game day.”



After a performance, it's essential to avoid becoming complacent with comfort. That often means walking a fine line. Do pregame rituals help you? Why or why not? What happens when you feel a bit uncomfortable while performing? What do you focus on?

Think about how you can create discomfort in preparation to ensure you will be comfortable the next time you are performing. Reflecting on these aspects of your performance mind will help you become more self-aware. This new perspective will have you doing an even better job of being uncomfortable when you need to be and yet comfortable when your performance requires it.

I met Kyle Maynard in the summer of 2017 on a group trip to Israel. Kyle was born a quadruple congenital amputee—missing all four limbs just above the elbows and knees. When I first met him, I was unsure if I should reach out my hand, extend a fist, or just wave. That changed in an instant as he reached out his upper arm to shake my hand. You see, Kyle is someone who changes your perceptions almost instantly.

Kyle has a smile and a laugh that are contagious. The way he navigates the world with his body and his mind is inspirational. He is also an extremely deep thinker who admits to being on a constant journey of discovery. He is self-confident but unafraid to make himself vulnerable. Of all the athletes I have met, Kyle is the most impressive—not because of the body he was born with, but because of the mind he has developed. As I observed him weave his wheelchair through the cobbled streets of Jerusalem, I was floored by his grit, determination, and overall fearlessness.

Five days into our trip, our group woke up at 3:30 a.m. to get on a bus and head to Masada, where we would climb the mountain and watch the sunrise. Masada is an old fortress in the middle of the desert, overlooking the Dead Sea. Despite the early wakeup call, Kyle was curious about my work and asked me a series of questions about how athletes I work with prepare to perform. I told him about visualization, self-talk, breathing—all the mental fundamentals that I share with clients. I didn't think too much of the conversation after that.

When we arrived at Masada and unloaded, Kyle grabbed a bunch of towels and duct tape from the luggage compartment. He didn't have his climbing equipment, I learned, so he was making do by wrapping his elbows for support. In 2012, he had become the first quadruple amputee to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, and he did it without prostheses.

We didn't get to the top of the mountain for the sunrise, but as beautiful as

nature is, sometimes human nature is even more awe-inspiring. After watching the sunrise from a quarter of the way up, we continued our climb. Strangers from all over the world stopped to talk with Kyle, using words like *hero* and *role model*. I watched jaws drop as kids and adults alike saw him crawling up the mountain. Meanwhile, Kyle just kept climbing, his head down, listening to his music. He would later tell me that his legs went numb at one point, so he had to use his elbows to pull himself up the mountain.

Three hours later, we reached the top of Masada—three hours in the Israeli desert, climbing up a dirt path of rock and rubble. Strangers and friends began hugging and kissing Kyle. Some were crying. I teared up, overwhelmed by what I had witnessed and by the power of awe, the power of a moment, the power of the performance mind. When we were finally back on the bus, I switched roles with Kyle and began peppering him with questions.

I asked him if he ever gets doubts about whether he will be able to make it.

“Sure I do,” he said, “but I know those are just thoughts, and I know I can do it if I just stay locked into the present. I climbed Mount Aconcagua, which is the biggest summit in South America.” He told me he’d heard that seven out of a thousand climbers die each year trying to climb it. “The weather conditions were brutal, and at one point I literally could not see past three feet in front of me. At that point, I literally wondered if I would live. But I gathered myself and just started saying to myself, *Three feet. Keep going three feet. Three feet.*”

Kyle wasn’t worried about what the outcome would be. He was just focused on doing the best he could, right then in the present.

Before the day of our climb up Masada, Kyle had realized it was similar in length to Stone Mountain, a climb he had done a number of times in Atlanta. So he had envisioned what it would take to do it without his usual climbing equipment, and he had found alternatives. When he had asked me for mental tools that morning on the bus ride, he was focusing on the future, on what the climb would be like. But from the moment we got off the bus to the moment we reached the summit, Kyle wasn’t thinking about the future—how quickly everyone else was getting up the mountain, what the summit would be like, how he would feel when he got to the top, how sore he would be the next day. He was just focused on three feet. He was in the moment. He had focused on

the future in preparation so that he could focus on the present while performing, giving himself the best shot at success.

These days it seems as if everyone is trying to stay “in the moment,” but that idea is only partly right. Yes, being present in performance is a necessity. But directing your attention to the future is the path to great preparation. To become a high achiever, you will need to do each at the right times.

Thinking about the future allows you to create a vision that will drive you—a picture of how you want to show up when you’re performing, the results you hope to achieve, and how your next performance will feed your long-term goals and purpose. Where do you want to go? What’s the best path to get there? With a future focus, you have the opportunity to visualize the details of your performance so you can prepare yourself mentally and create a solid game plan.

But when it’s time to perform, you have to shift into the present. Being “in the moment” helps you let go of past mistakes and potential future outcomes; it increases your concentration and focus, and helps you perform tasks more accurately. When we are present *right now*, distractions don’t prevent us from taking advantage of the opportunities at hand.

Imagine if we reversed the two, though. Without a future focus, your preparation would be unfocused, scattered, and unmotivated. And if you couldn’t be present in performance, you would miss opportunities in the moment to perform up to your potential, and distractions would pull you off balance.

Without the future in mind during preparation, we lack a vision. Without the present in mind during performance, we lack presence. We need to focus on both—at the right times—to maximize our results.

Future Focus for Better Outcomes

George Mason University had a relatively anonymous men’s basketball team until 2006. That year in the NCAA Tournament, they made a magical run to the Final Four, paving the way for the many Cinderella runs that followed. Many experts and pundits didn’t believe a “mid-major” team could make it to the Final Four—until George Mason made it happen.

Coach Chris Caputo, an assistant coach at the time, shared an incredible

story on my podcast. His head coach, Jim Larrañaga, was a believer in legendary sport psychologist Bob Rotella's work with performers. Rotella, a mainstay on the PGA Tour, arrived on George Mason's campus in the fall of 2005 and led a workshop with the team. He had them close their eyes and dream the biggest dream they could imagine for the year, and then asked star Lamar Butler to share what he saw.

"I dreamed that we went to the Final Four," said Butler.

Other players laughed. Butler's vision was unthinkable.

"Why are you guys laughing?" Rotella promptly asked. "Do you think it's not possible? Why not you guys? Are you going to believe in somebody else rather than yourselves?"

Rotella challenged them to envision a future beyond what they thought might be possible, and then match their actions with their dreams. And that's what they did, all the way to a historic Final Four run.

Was it that activity—dreaming of a certain outcome, visualizing success—that allowed them to achieve such a lofty goal? I don't know for sure, but it certainly didn't hurt. Perhaps the focus on a specific future sparked a process of hard work that then led to each player focusing on the things that mattered most, in preparation and in performance.

Recently, I had the opportunity to confirm the story with Lamar, who is now a high school coach. He told me that he used visualization throughout that season, and that the ability to think about the future via visualization became a big part of how he primed his mind as a professional player as well.

The human brain's ability to consider the future is a defense mechanism; it helps us make quality decisions in the present that lead to better outcomes in the future. It prompts us to look both ways before crossing the street. It keeps us from popping someone in the nose when we're angry. It reminds us to put our seatbelt on. The brain allows us to strategize, plan, dream, imagine, and visualize with little effort. Because of that, our brain is our greatest asset—and sometimes our biggest saboteur.

Psychological concepts of willpower, delayed gratification, visualization, and even daydreaming are all factors in determining success, and they are all necessary in preparation. Focusing on the future requires a finely tuned awareness of where we want to go and what we want to happen. It requires discipline—the self-regulation to avoid eating the extra slice of pizza or skipping that extra hour of sleep because of the consequences to your health.

Being future focused is creating a long-term vision that helps guide and motivate your preparation. It's taking the time to carefully visualize your performance, to engage in "mental practice."

Even though our mind is a prediction machine that is often focused on the future, maintaining an intentional future focus, with a goal of enhancing our performance, is not easy. Often, it means fighting against the dopamine cravings of our brain, putting off immediate pleasures or short-term gains for long-term goals or future benefits.

In his book *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg provides a great framework for how to leverage the future to get what you want: create routines by giving yourself a cue or signal to take an action, followed by a reward to solidify the routine—thus creating a habit.²²⁶ The future reward is crucial; it gives the brain motivation to follow through with the routine. The work of preparation isn't easy; I've covered that extensively in the discussions of the work mind (shift 2) and the uncomfortable mind (shift 6). Maintaining those critical elements of preparation would be almost impossible without the future mind. Without a focus on the future in our preparation, we don't have a sense of what we're working for—our big goals and dreams. Without that potential reward, it can be difficult to find the willpower and grit to keep pushing ourselves, to keep showing up, to keep training and practicing.

I recently had an executive client who wanted to develop the habit of journaling. He often struggled with creating routines and needed help creating more thoughtful space in his day. Every morning he brews his own coffee—a habit he established years ago. We decided to anchor his coffee habit with his desire to journal. His cue every morning is to start his coffee, then to journal while it brews. His reward for doing a journaling session is that he gets to drink a fresh cup of coffee. The future desire drives the habit.

Future focus can be about sacrifice, but it's often about connecting your preparation to the specific outcomes you want and preparing yourself for opportunities so you can perform in the moment. We need to create systems, tools, and habits to help us develop our future focus. In a world screaming for our attention, the one who gets noticed is the one who prepares with the future in mind.

Let's explore how some of the best performers in the world use the power of the mind to prepare for some of the highest stakes possible.

Perhaps the most well-known research about the importance of delayed gratification and willpower is the marshmallow experiment. This study, which started in the 1970s, looked at kids' ability to delay gratification: if they could hold off temptation while sitting alone in a room with a marshmallow in front of them, they would get a second marshmallow to eat later. When the kids who were able to delay gratification became teenagers, they were more successful in school, received higher test scores on the SAT, and were better able to cope with stress and frustration. In follow-up studies, the researchers found that those who delayed gratification had lower levels of substance abuse, lower likelihood of obesity, better responses to stress, better social skills, and generally better scores in a range of other life measures.²²⁷ Those kids had the power of future focus, and they reaped the rewards throughout their lives.

Kelly McGonigal, author of *The Willpower Instinct*, explains that humans have two minds: the version that “acts on impulse and seeks immediate gratification” and the version that “controls our impulses and delays gratification to protect our long-term goals.” (It doesn't sound so different from Daniel Kahneman's approach or the shifts I describe throughout this book.) McGonigal explains how our mind switches back and forth between wanting to lose weight and wanting to eat the cookie:

This is what defines the willpower challenge: Part of you wants one thing, and another part of you wants something else. Or your present self wants one thing, but your future self would be better off if you did something else. When these two selves disagree, one version of us has to override the other.²²⁸

With that in mind, McGonigal points out that willpower is not just about saying “no” and resisting temptation. She breaks it into three components:

- **I Will Power:** Getting clear on what you will do in the future
- **I Won't Power:** Knowing what you don't want in the future
- **I Want Power:** The ability to think about what you want in the future

Future focus allows you to consider what you want in the future and make

better decisions in the present to achieve it. But the future doesn't just help us with moment-to-moment decisions and tasks; it also helps us with the big, audacious dreams.

Vision and Purpose Help You Define Your Future

The research on the importance of vision and purpose is robust. A 2013 study found that people who were aware of their life purpose were happier.²²⁹ A 2016 study found that people living with a purpose produced more wealth and had better health.²³⁰ Having a clear purpose has also been linked to unlocking the flow state and increasing grit. And from an organizational perspective, research has found that purpose-driven companies outperform the market 15 to 1.²³¹

Purpose, or *ikigai*—loosely, “a reason for being”—may be the explanation for why some Japanese people live such long, healthy, and productive lives. How does one find *ikigai*? It starts with assessing what you want to define your life and work. Some people suggest using three questions:

1. What do you value?
2. What are you good at?
3. What do you like to do?

Others add the questions “What can you be paid for?” and “What does the world need?” Regardless, what you're really asking is this: What do you hope will define the future of your work or career? What would make you feel happy and fulfilled?

Like greatness, *ikigai* is not easily attained. A 2010 survey of 2,000 Japanese men and women found that only 31 percent of participants felt as though their work aligned with their *ikigai*.²³²

I have seen the importance of *ikigai*—of purpose and vision—play out in my performance coaching work. Sam, a professional soccer player ten years into his career, had just been traded to a new team. He had established himself as a solid starter. When I began working with the team, I met with him one-on-one. He told me about his career—the teams he had played for, the awards he had won, and so on. After a while, I asked him a simple question: “Why do you play soccer?”

Sam looked at me, puzzled, and said, “That’s a really good question.”

I was equally puzzled. Here was a guy who had done numerous interviews and media appearances, and yet he didn’t have a ready answer for this fundamental question.

Sam sat silently for a few moments and then said, “I knew the answer ten years ago: become a starter, make a certain amount of money, win, make a career, fulfill my potential, because I am passionate about the game. But sitting here right now . . . I really don’t know.”

We spent the rest of our time that day unpacking why he played and discussing what he wanted to do in the future. His undefined purpose and lack of a vision for his relationship with soccer was constricting his passion. He needed to ask the tough questions and create space to contemplate the future. He left the meeting with amazing clarity, focused around his desire to win, to be a great teammate, to build relationships, and to enjoy the game. He ended up having a terrific season.

When I work with CEOs and leaders in corporate organizations, we often talk about the power of working *on* the business rather than *in* the business. You see, elite performers often get to the top of the mountain because of their excellence in working *in* the business—think the salesperson who makes more sales than anyone. They are incredible at executing. But at some point, if they want to perform at the leadership level, they have to learn how to work *on* the business, making time to define a purpose and vision for the organization and to build a strategy for getting there.

People with a compelling vision have changed the world. John F. Kennedy had a vision of putting a man on the moon. Martin Luther King Jr. had a vision that all people would be treated equally. Steve Jobs had a vision that Apple would disrupt the technology industry. Establishing a vision that guides you during preparation can help you overcome obstacles and achieve goals faster.

The Power of Visualizing and Mental Practice

Michael Phelps is one of the best swimmers of all time. There is no denying his physical tools; scientists have deemed his body perfect for swimming. But at a very young age he also started training his brain with visualization. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, his coach Bob Bowman said, “He’s the

best I have ever seen, and maybe the best ever, in terms of visualization. He will see exactly the perfect race. And he will see it like he's sitting in the stands, and he will see it like he's in the water. And then he will go through scenarios of what to do if things don't go well."

Phelps goes on to explain, "If my suit ripped or my goggles broke, what would I do?"²³³ His visualization prepares him mentally and physically for any scenario—good or bad—so that once he's in the water, he will not be fazed. It frees him up to be present, swim in the moment, and be the athlete that he's trained himself to be. The freedom and clarity that he has when he's performing is founded on the visualization, or mental reps, he has accumulated during preparation.

Performers have been leveraging mental imagery or visualization for decades. Greg Louganis, who won back-to-back Olympic gold medals in diving in the 1980s, mentioned that he started visualizing when he was three years old, as a dancer.²³⁴ Once he got onstage, he had already seen the entire routine in detail. He was clear. As an adult, Louganis used this visualization process to allow his mind to be free, while his feet were where they needed to be once the performance was underway—on the diving board, getting ready to plunge into the pool below.

Legendary athletes like Larry Bird, Carli Lloyd, Chris Evert, Lance Armstrong, Bill Russell, and Picabo Street all wove visualization into their preparation. Armstrong would map out entire bike races and etch the turns into his brain so he could rely on his body to execute in the moment.²³⁵

Another approach to visualization is mental practice. Research in neuroscience has found that the brain changes in structure and function based on experience.²³⁶ Neuroscientist Alvaro Pascual-Leone compared pianists who practiced playing the piano and those who simply thought about playing the piano in a form of deep mental practice, imagining each note. He found that both physical practice and "mental practice resulted in a similar reorganization of the brain." Other research, too, has shown that the brain does not differentiate between visualizing an event and actually experiencing it.²³⁷

The importance or effectiveness of visualization can shift, though, based on what you are trying to learn. Professor Phillip Post has studied visualization extensively and believes that

imagery might be effective for enhancing learner's skill acquisition of

tasks that contain greater cognitive elements, such as tasks that require decision-making or remembering a sequence or pattern, as opposed to motor elements, or tasks that require correct skill execution, like a soccer kick. However, with more experienced performers, imagery appears to be effective on a range of tasks, including both motor and cognitive.²³⁸

The lesson here is that it takes all kinds of practice to grow, and that the best kind of practice might change *as* you grow.

Train your brain by visualizing the future in detail. Get those mental reps in. Challenge yourself to be creative while you're imagining your performance. Take the time to see yourself adjusting to various situations. That's what Phelps does, and it can make all the difference even for those of us who aren't world champion swimmers.

Daydreaming to Bolster Creativity

Even when we believe we are resting our body and mind, often we are thinking about the future. Your brain is never truly asleep; research has shown that even when you are asleep, your brain activity continues to churn. And naturally, your mind can also imagine or dream while you are awake. That's why imagination, creativity, and daydreaming are skills that we can learn and practice. When we allow our mind to wander, we are creating space for our brain to process information, envision possible futures, and consider alternative options for getting there. It's no surprise, then, that mind wandering and daydreaming have been linked to both creativity and planning.

But the question is not whether or not you daydream. According to research, a normal, healthy mind wanders on average 30 percent of the time.²³⁹ The question is whether you will do so *intentionally*. You don't have to be at the mercy of your wandering mind. Instead you can create space to roam with performance in mind.

For some skills, like problem solving, daydreaming is extremely useful. Harvard University researcher and psychologist Shelley H. Carson points out, "A distraction may provide the break you need to disengage from a fixation on the ineffective solution."²⁴⁰ Carson is not alone in her praise for distraction and free thinking time. Thomas Edison, who had more than 1,000 patents to

his name, would go fishing for about an hour almost every day. “I really never caught any fish,” he said, “because I never used bait. Because when you fish without bait, people don’t bother you and neither do the fish. It provides me my best time to think.”²⁴¹

We see this in our daily lives. You can’t remember someone’s name until you let your mind wander, and then, boom! The name pops into your head. Or you’re singing away in the shower when a new business idea occurs to you. “Aha!” moments of creativity often occur when we stop focusing on the present and instead let the mind relax and wander, which often leads to thinking about the future. A study published at UC Santa Barbara revealed that participants reported 20 percent of their most noteworthy ideas each day were formed

during spontaneous task-independent mind wandering, [such as] engaging in an activity other than working [and] thinking about something unrelated to the generated idea. . . . Ideas that occurred during mind wandering were more likely to be associated with overcoming an impasse on a problem and to be experienced as “aha” moments, compared with ideas generated while on task.²⁴²

How can you create habits during preparation that let your mind intentionally run amok?

Keeping It in the Present

It was 2017, and Kobe Bryant had officially retired from basketball. He entered the Los Angeles Chargers meeting room wearing shorts and a T-shirt, walking like an athlete who’d given twenty years to the game, with a little limp in each step. The energy in the room rose as everyone clapped, and a few in the audience of professional football players chanted his name. They knew they were in the presence of greatness.

When Kobe started talking, the room went silent. All eyes on him. Ultimate respect. Game recognizes game. Kobe shared book recommendations and his thoughts on how important it is to move on to the next shot. Then he took a question from the crowd.

“Kobe . . . walk us through how you stay in the now.”

Kobe swayed a bit and then explained, “It’s a process . . . and it’s never perfect. And it never will be perfect.” He then told a story from a critical period in his life.²⁴³

He was playing in a game during his sophomore year of high school, and his team had a one-point lead. It was the fourth quarter, and he was on defense. He started thinking that the game was in the bag, and when he let his mind drift to the celebration later that night, he paid the price. The opposing team put up a shot, and Kobe—distracted and not in the moment—followed the flight of the ball rather than doing his job and boxing out his man. His opponent cut away from him, grabbed the offensive rebound, and put it back in to win the game. Kobe was devastated.

The next day in geometry class, Kobe noticed his mind start to wander—just as it had during the game. As someone, already at that young age, with rare humility (shift 1) and perfectionistic tendencies (shift 3), Kobe didn’t just make a mistake during the game; he also recognized his mistake and the need to correct it. What’s more, he had the wherewithal to connect the dots. When his mind wandered, his performance suffered. From that point on, Kobe would use geometry class to test and train his mind to focus even when the topic was monotonous or boring. At the age of sixteen, Kobe started training his performance mind—the ability to be in the moment.

High performers are at their best when they are not thinking. When they begin noticing their thoughts, they typically find themselves focused on the future or the past. But if you are thinking too far into the future, or too much about the future, you may miss the moment. When we perform, we are at our best in the present.

Of course, we get the advice to “be more present” all the time. But what exactly does it mean? Being present is about being grounded in the moment—right here, right now. It’s about being, not becoming. When we are present, we are existing in the environment we are in. We are centered and mindful. According to Eckhart Tolle, the author of *The Power of Now*, “Time isn’t precious at all, because it is an illusion. What you perceive as precious is not time but the one point that is out of time: the Now. That is precious indeed. The more you are focused on time—past and future—the more you miss the Now, the most precious thing there is.”²⁴⁴ Being present in performance is all about tapping into the potential of the now, the moment, with no concern for

yesterday or tomorrow, for twenty minutes ago or twenty minutes from now.

While this description may not seem exactly concrete, the benefits of being present definitely are. When we are present in the moment and focused on the now, we have greater concentration, better attention to detail, and more clarity on what is most important to do in the moment—and what we should do next. We also benefit from more effective decision-making and better task execution. Research has even shown that being present increases charisma—often a crucial characteristic for great performers and leaders.²⁴⁵ Indeed, having met two US presidents, I was struck by how both made the people around them feel special by simply inhabiting the moment: shaking hands, making eye contact, offering their full attention, and being empathetic.

The ability to be where our feet are is so valuable, and the research continues to build on that value. Yet our technological advances have made it harder and harder to be right here, right now. For starters, most of us carry around distractions in our pocket that vibrate, ring, or sing songs to get our attention. One study found that the mere presence of a cell phone at a meeting decreased the ability of the meeting participants to have a quality conversation.²⁴⁶ The expectation has become that we should never be focused on one thing; whether we're walking down the street, sitting at the dinner table with family, or having drinks with friends, our phones have become part of processes that used to be reserved for our full attention. Google, Facebook, and Apple all employ PhDs to engineer addictive products designed to grab our attention and hold it, even if we don't want them to. With our attention being split on a regular basis, it's becoming harder and harder to get into the deep focus necessary to be at our best when performing.

So what do we do? We practice.

What do you look like when you are present? What's your approach to tapping into the moment? How do you create space for the present in your performance? Let's unpack the what and the how of planning for the future while staying firmly grounded in the now.

Practicing Mindfulness

Over the past twenty years, fans of men's tennis have enjoyed three dominant players: Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, and Novak Djokovic. Djokovic credits mindfulness training with helping him develop his performance mind, so he

can be at his best when it matters most. He is such a believer in the training that he credits mindfulness for his top ten status. When you watch Djokovic play, you see intensity and fearlessness. You see why he is nicknamed “Joker.” He plays moment to moment. He smiles. He has fun. He is present. He taps into—and embodies—his performance mind.

Mindfulness has gone mainstream in recent years, thanks in large part to the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR). Research indicates that MBSR reduces stress, anxiety, and depression.²⁴⁷ Zinn defines *mindfulness* as paying attention in a particular way—on purpose, in the present, and nonjudgmentally—to what is happening within us, especially our emotional state, and to what is happening in our environment. The goal is to become both relaxed and energized, a state that offers incredible benefits to the performer.

In one University of Westminster study, meditation training led to enhanced self-confidence.²⁴⁸ Another study found that managers who were more mindful performed better on the job²⁴⁹ and had increased concentration while performing at work.²⁵⁰ Neuropsychological research has found that mindfulness offers benefits by influencing our “(a) attention regulation, (b) body awareness, (c) emotion regulation (including reappraisal and exposure, extinction, and reconsolidation), and (d) change in perspective on the self”—and evidence suggests important links between mindfulness practice and altered brain patterns.²⁵¹ Simply put, mindfulness training not only helps us be more present, but also changes how the brain functions; it increases our ability to pay attention when we are performing.

Mindfulness does take practice, though. It does not come easily. Later in the shift, I’ll share some techniques, but it can all start with the effort of meditating just ten to fifteen minutes each morning, with a focus on bringing your attention to the moment.

Letting Go of Distractions

Today, Teague Moore (mentioned in shift 2) is the head wrestling coach at American University, but he started his career as a great high school wrestler, which helped him earn a scholarship to powerhouse Oklahoma State University. Moore had some success during his first year at Oklahoma State, but he broke out in his sophomore year. After entering the NCAA Wrestling

Championships, though, he struggled to focus, to be present.

“There was just static around me,” he confessed on my podcast. “My thought process couldn’t get narrowed. There were just little distractions.”²⁵² He was mind wandering when he should have been present and focused on his performance in the moment. That year he finished fourth in the country, which is no small feat, and it helped him believe that he could wrestle on a national level. But he knew he was capable of unlocking another level.

Moore continued to be motivated and purposeful throughout his junior year and entered the NCAA Wrestling Championships as the No. 3 seed. He fought throughout the tournament to stay present from match to match. He earned an opportunity to wrestle in the championship, and he pinned his opponent in the second round, becoming a national champion.

Distractions can show up in all forms, of course, but internally, our thoughts about the future and the past are often the culprits. Externally, in our environment, most distractions are things outside of our control. In shift 6, we discussed the important idea of letting go of results during performance, especially when we’ve made a mistake or didn’t execute how we thought we would. We also have to fight to let go of the distractions in our environment, though, which are always present. When we practice bringing our focus and attention to the present moment—to what is happening within us and to what is within our control—it can help us let go of distractions and respond in the moment when we’re performing.

Using the Future to Be More Present

It would be difficult to find a more cohesive unit than the Blue Angels. The Angels are military pilots who each have put in at least 1,250 hours flying tactical jets and have experience taking off from and landing on airplane carriers. Being an Angel is a massive honor. Their mission is “to showcase the pride and professionalism of the United States Navy and Marine Corps by inspiring a culture of excellence and service to country through flight demonstrations and community outreach.” The Angels put on dangerous flight shows all over the country, flying within feet of each other while traveling between 120 and 700 miles an hour.²⁵³ Any wrong movement could mean death.

When working with teams and individuals, I often talk about the Angels

as an example of the preparation mind and the performance mind. Their training is intense, including one area of preparation that is a “must”: daily visualization. Sitting around a conference table in chairs set to cockpit height, the pilots respond to commands and simulate close flying, keeping their eyes focused on a spot on the plane next to them.²⁵⁴

The Angels are constantly thinking about how they want to show up for live shows—they are future focused. That focus allows them to handle weather changes, mood changes, and different show sites that present challenges. Additionally, they face limitations in terms of airtime practice, due to costs and other factors, so “chair flying,” as they call the visualization exercise, allows them to get in more reps. Because of those extra reps and their detailed mental practice, these pilots are more able to stay present while flying, which is absolutely critical. One distraction could lead to catastrophe. If they aren’t present in that moment—if their minds are cluttered or they are thinking two steps ahead—they sacrifice not only themselves, but also their teammates.

The Blue Angels’ ability to focus intentionally on the future in preparation, especially through visualization, allows them to be present once they’re up in the air. Why? Because their minds have already experienced the moment through training. They have seen it and dreamed it, and now all they have to do is execute that same moment.

When we have been through a moment already, either in our mind or in reality, it frees us up to simply be grounded in the moment and to leverage all of our focus, energy, and presence in the present. That present performance mind is where our potential lives.

The polarity of future focus and being present is a beautiful one. The better we get at visualizing in preparation, the better we will be at performing in the moment, in a way that seems raw, unrehearsed, and real, because we are connected to our current environment, our own emotions, and the emotions and needs of those around us.

Exercise Section

Cementing Your Focus

Training your mind to recognize when to direct your attention to the future and when to direct it to the present is essential. If done right, the future focus

will help free you up to be present in performance, but you also have to practice being present if you want to tap into that focus when the lights are on. I use the following strategies to help clients intentionally correct their focus for preparation and performance. Both minds require work and intention. They require practice. If you want to be a master of the future and the present, then you have to put in the time and work on each one. The rewards for doing so are massive.

It's Been a Great Year, It's Been a Great Life

Articulating your vision in specific terms is an excellent way to get clear on what you want. Try this exercise: Envision yourself one year from today. Focus on the details of where you are or what you've achieved mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, especially as those details relate to how you want your performance to improve. Now, pretend you are calling a friend, a mentor, or even your past self. Talking in the present tense, begin to describe what you've accomplished, beginning with, "It's January 1, 2022, and it's been a great year because . . ."

Another great method is the "Give yourself an A" approach described by Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander in *The Art of Possibility*. Benjamin Zander, founder of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, would tell his New England Conservatory of Music students on the first day of class that they would receive an A. However, they had to write him a letter as though from the future, dating it from the last day of school, beginning with these words: *Dear Mr. Zander, I got my A because . . .*²⁵⁵ The students had to create a clear and compelling vision of a great school year, and explain exactly how they would make it great—thus creating a vision for their preparation, not just for their outcomes.

You can extrapolate these ideas to create a big-picture vision for your life or any aspect of your life, such as the progression of your career. Put pieces of paper on the ground that signify each future decade of your life, possibly by age (i.e., 20s, 30s, 40s, and so on). Stand on each piece of paper, and talk about what is going on in your life, your career, your family, your personal growth during that decade. Where are you mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally? Think about how you want to live that vision going forward.

Vision Board

I visited [Monday.com](https://www.monday.com), a tech company, when I was on a trip to Tel Aviv. As soon as I walked through the doors, I noticed a vision board, front and center, for everyone to see. It included metrics, especially revenue goals for the next four years, that the company wanted to reach to become a \$1 billion “tech giant”—their words, not mine. The board was updated constantly as the company reached short-term goals on the way to achieving its vision.

Some people think having a vision board is too woo-woo, but the greats use them. And there are no rules about what shape or form a vision board must take. Remember the story of Katie Ledecky writing 565 on her swim float? That was her version of a vision board.

How can you create and leverage a vision board that guides you in your preparation? Make sure you choose a way to update it as you make progress.

Imagery Script

Our imagination is incredibly powerful; it can allow us to experience an imagined event as if it were real, complete with sensations and emotions. We can train our imagination. Visualizations allow us to prepare for, and feel control over, the positive outcome of a high-stakes performance. It is no surprise, then, that many performers and athletes use visualization to prepare for their most important events.

On my website (www.strongskills.co/book) you can find an imagery script that I've adapted over the years from various practitioners. It involves some meditation instruction and a detailed imagination exercise. Work with a partner so that one person reads while the other does the exercise.

To take this technique to the next level, create your own imagery script for your performance. Your script doesn't have to be too long, but it should reference a great performance or what your performance looks like when you are at your best. Remember to activate your senses as much as possible. Once you are finished writing the script, record yourself reading the script out loud so you can listen to it whenever necessary.

Reset Button

If you have ever gone bowling, especially in an older alley, you've probably

seen that white “reset” button next to the ball retriever. Or maybe you’ve seen the reset button on a GFCI electrical outlet or a power strip. The purpose of this button is to clear an obstruction so things can move forward as they should. When I work with students to help them perform on a test, I will often have them create a reset button of sorts—one they can use when their focus wavers and shifts to a future outcome—to create a mental obstacle that keeps them from moving forward, out of the moment. This mental reset button can be as simple as taking their index finger and pressing it on the desk. The goal is to help bring one’s focus back to the now.

Based on the details of your performance, and on when or how you catch yourself shifting into future focus, create a reset button for yourself. Make it something tactile to connect yourself with your body and your environment.

Take in the Entire Room

This technique is helpful for feeling present in your environment and for increasing your comfort in a particular setting right before a performance. Relax your body and mind, and then carefully move throughout the room as much as you can. As you do, take note of everything. Pay attention to small details. Pay close attention to those things that might distract you during your performance and pull you away from being present.

Next, close your eyes and describe everything that you saw. Mentally notice these distractions before letting them go. As you complete the exercise, feel yourself grounded in the space.

Eat a Raisin

This is a common technique for training your brain to be mindfully present. Pick a single raisin to eat. Before you eat the raisin, notice all aspects of it: shape, smell, texture, color, and more. Try to really focus on the raisin and nothing else. Then place it in your mouth and move it around, feeling the texture on your tongue and paying close attention to the taste. Slowly chew the raisin. If you find your mind drifting away from the raisin, simply bring your thoughts back to something specific, such as how it sounds as you chew the raisin. Be mindful of all of the elements of the raisin, and then swallow it.

Circle Breath

There are so many great meditation and breathing tools out there. If you have a practice that helps you tap into the present, great. If not, you may want to try a circle breath. A circle breath begins simply by inhaling through your nose so your breath fills your belly. Hold the breath for a few seconds, and then exhale through your mouth. The stomach expands on the inhale and contracts on the exhale. Simply direct your attention to each breath as you repeat this exercise. Anytime a thought or feeling pops up, shift your attention back to the breath.

You can use the circle breath exercise at any time, including just before a performance or even briefly during a performance, to center yourself and bring your mind to the present.



Focusing on the future can unlock your ability to be present in performance. Practice both minds. Train yourself to tap into the power of the future through visualization and vision, and to access the power of the present through focus. We live in a fast, ever-changing world that requires us to shift between the two. As our world continues to evolve, these two sides of the shift will become more and more mandatory for elite performance. It's up to you to commit to both!

Candace Parker has been elite at every level of basketball. In high school, she won the Gatorade National Girls Basketball Player of the Year award—in 2003 and 2004.²⁵⁶⁻²⁵⁷ In college, she won Player of the Year honors and led her team to back-to-back championships. As a pro, she was the first pick in the WNBA draft, was a two-time MVP, secured the WNBA Finals MVP award when her team won the championship in 2016, and earned two Olympic gold medals.²⁵⁸ Today, she balances her basketball career with being a mom and a TV analyst. At six foot four, you might presume Parker was *born* to be a basketball player, but something else has allowed her to rise to the top of her profession and play at the peak of her potential: her ability to cultivate her performance mind.

Growing up in Chicago, Parker idolized Michael Jordan. The Parkers were a basketball family, but more important, they were a family that demanded excellence. Her dad, Larry, played at the University of Iowa; her brother Anthony would later play in the NBA; and her brother Marcus would become an accomplished doctor. Larry was tough on his daughter. As Parker explained when I interviewed her on my podcast, “Before I had expectations of myself, the people around me had higher expectations than I could have ever imagined.”²⁵⁹ In a *Sports Illustrated* interview from 2005, she specifically points to her dad for challenging her to be her best:

He did things to make me mad, to challenge me, because I was so much more athletic and had so much more knowledge of the game than everyone else that sometimes I just coasted. If me and my dad went to a park and he didn't think I was practicing hard enough, he'd just get in the car and leave. And I'd have to run home. I mean run home. Once I figured that out, I'd always try to go to close-by parks.²⁶⁰

For performers who have high expectations for themselves or face high

expectations from others, the result is often fear: *What if I fail to live up to those expectations?* That mindset helped Parker in preparation. It boosted her work ethic, focused her attention on the fine details, helped her persevere. But that same mindset would sometimes get in the way when she was performing. She told me that even after she had established herself as a Hall of Fame basketball player, she still was working on not bringing that fear-based mind to her performances. “I missed two critical free throws overseas that could have won us our series,” she explained. “And after everything was over, I remember asking myself, ‘What did you think when you were shooting those free throws?’”²⁶¹ Her mind was racing and she was nervous, which would be normal for anyone in that position. But she wasn’t telling herself to take the shot and nail it like she had millions of times. Instead she was saying, “I hope I don’t miss.”

She vowed to never let fear-based thinking limit her performance again: “If I miss, it will be because I missed; it will not be because of what happened between my ears.”²⁶²

As Parker has continued to progress in her career, she has learned how to let go of missed shots and mistakes while performing, to let go of the fear of failure those moments can prompt. Now she simply plays fearlessly, aggressively, without regard for the outcome and with appropriate risk-taking.

Fear is not necessarily bad. Fearlessness is not necessarily good. It’s all about the *when*.

Fear is useful in preparation because it creates concern and anxiety about the outcome, which motivates us to spend the time necessary to prepare, even when we may not feel like doing so. If we accept failure as our fate in preparation—and go to “what does it matter anyway?” thinking—we limit our possibilities. While preparing, we need a healthy fear of failure to drive us. We have goals, and we don’t want to miss hitting them.

When we are performing, though, we need to tap into our fearlessness. Fearlessness provides us with the capacity to be bold, daring, even aggressive when it’s necessary in order to take the appropriate risks that performance requires for success. Being fearless helps us let go of our concerns about the outcome, as we do with other performance minds discussed throughout the book.

Fear is not the enemy; being fearful of fear is. When we develop a relationship with fear, it allows us to leverage that fear for good. If we sweep it

under the rug and try to pretend it isn't a component of our emotional life, it will rise up and hurt us when it's time to perform.

Fear of failure in preparation will help you stay sharp and fight complacency. Then, in performance, fearlessness will move you away from the brain's main function: to keep you safe.

When we are threatened, whether with actual threats or perceived threats, our fight-or-flight response kicks in. Our stress increases, our thinking narrows, and we tune out critical elements of our environment as the brain tries to decide whether to run or attack. When our success or our ability to reach our goal is threatened, our modern brain perceives that threat in much the same way as our ancestors' brains would have perceived a saber-toothed tiger walking into their cave.

If you bring a fearful mind into performance, your brain will do whatever is necessary to keep you "safe"—to prevent embarrassment or shame, or to make sure you don't lose—instead of doing whatever is necessary to allow you to perform at your best. This is why setting your mind is so important; if you leave it to chance, then you will be at the mercy of where your mind innately wants to go, which is often survival. Fearlessness is so hard to tap into in performance because it goes against the very nature of how the brain is designed to handle an intense situation.

In this shift, I'll share the positive power of a *healthy* dose of fear of failure in preparation—fear that we all carry, so we might as well leverage it. Doing so allows us to be fearless in performance. The greatest challenge is to shift your mind from fear to fearlessness when you are performing and back again, but meeting that challenge is possible and worthwhile.

How Fear Can Drive Us

On his incredible NPR podcast, *How I Built This*, Guy Raz asked business legend Mark Cuban about the pivotal time in his life after he had become a millionaire at age thirty, when he sold his company to CompuServe for six million dollars. Cuban, who wanted to be able to retire by age thirty-five, began to live like a "student" while investing the money he had made in stocks and young companies. Raz suggested that given his millionaire status, Cuban "had nothing to worry about."

Cuban responded, “I had to still worry about not screwing it up.” When Raz probed deeper, Cuban said, “Trust me, I had a healthy dose of fear. Every business I have started, I would count the months: Am I profitable? Do I have enough to pay the bills? I have been in this situation enough times, with start-ups, where the bill collectors were calling on a continuous basis.”²⁶³ Cuban’s relentless drive to build a company that wouldn’t fail led to the growth of the internet radio company [Broadcast.com](#)—which he eventually sold to Yahoo for \$5.7 billion.²⁶⁴

When Cuban is in the public eye or making a big business decision, his fearlessness shines. He took a risk in buying the Dallas Mavericks for a league record of \$285 million, and he was criticized for overpaying; today, the team is worth over two billion dollars.²⁶⁵ But underneath, he still uses a fear of failure to ensure that he is covering all of his bases, that he is protecting himself when it matters—during preparation.

Having a healthy sense of fear includes a willingness to acknowledge the worst possible outcome and go to work to ensure that it doesn’t come to fruition. When we are in this headspace, failure is real; it matters, and we will do whatever it takes to prevent it. When we approach the possibility of failure in this way, we are diligent. We dot all our Is and cross all our Ts. We turn over every stone and put in every necessary hour. We give our preparation all of our energy. We willingly make sacrifices. We consider every possibility that might occur during a performance and prepare ourselves to handle those possibilities. This fear of failure doesn’t feel good, but the restlessness of it drives us to find new ways to do things, new motivations, and an endless stream of opportunities.

While we often hear self-help gurus imploring us to live fearlessly and describing all the ways fear can limit us, the truth is that, used properly, fear of failure can absolutely be our friend. Elite performers often talk about leveraging fear in their preparation. Legendary baseball player Derek Jeter once said, “My greatest fear was not being prepared.”²⁶⁶ Michael Strahan, a Pro Bowl, record-setting NFL player and one of television’s most successful personalities, has said, “I’m more scared of failure than I am excited about the accolades that come with success.”²⁶⁷ They understand fear is a primary emotion that all humans feel. You can’t ignore it, so you might as well use it to your advantage.

When you feel fear during preparation, especially higher levels of anxiety,

it's important to do a threat analysis. Give yourself space to experience the feeling. Going through that, as painful as it might be, can prepare you and make you aware of all the possible "threats" that you might be associating with a performance. Each potential threat may be an opportunity for improvement.

One way to think about fear as a positive is to define it as the tension you feel between *where you are* and *where you want to be*. Preparation is how you narrow that gap. Fear of future regret will cause us to do things that we don't necessarily want to do in the moment, but that will help us get to where we want to be. It's important that we fear the worst-case scenario so we will work in preparation to stop it in its tracks. We can't let a lack of discipline, mechanics, or strategy rule the day. Instead, we need to fight the failure we fear.

Use Actual Failures as Motivators

President Abraham Lincoln is credited with saying, "My great concern is not whether you have failed, but whether you are content with your failure." Lincoln, who failed a lot throughout his life, surely understood that each failure was an event, not a defining aspect of who he was. Failure is a test, a motivator for us to learn what is necessary to get better. We can use those failures and go to work, making sure they won't happen again.

People are not failures; they simply have failed in their attempts. Great performers use a failure or mistake as a litmus test. Then they leverage the agony of defeat, doing everything in their power to make sure it won't happen in the future.

Serena Williams has been open about her fear of failure. "It's the biggest factor for me. Like, if I lose, all hell breaks loose, literally. Literally! I go home, I practice harder, I do more," she said in one interview. "I hate losing more than I love winning."²⁶⁸ Williams leverages her fear of failure, especially how past failures made her feel, to learn, grow, and improve in her preparation. This type of thinking, though, requires resilience and a growth mindset. People who struggle to bounce back from losses internalize the failure—they believe it defines them and their abilities. People who keep advancing use past failures as signs that they have more work to do, and they get to it.

You probably know of Carol Dweck's groundbreaking work on fixed and

growth mindsets, which she wrote about in the best seller *Mindset*. Fundamentally, these two mindsets define how we handle challenges, mistakes, losses, missteps, and failures in life. If we believe our intelligence, knowledge, and abilities are fixed, each loss is a sign that we are inferior in some way, incapable of succeeding. If we believe our intelligence, knowledge, and abilities can grow over time and with effort, we take losses in stride and use them to inform and drive our efforts to improve.²⁶⁹

People, especially young people, often believe they're either good at math or bad at math (an example of a fixed mindset), so it's a great area for testing the effects of the growth mindset. Many studies have shown that when students are taught that intelligence is not fixed, that our brains change over time as we learn, and that we're all capable of getting better at almost anything—which is absolutely true—their math grades and test scores increase, even for students who have not previously performed well in math.²⁷⁰

Letting fear of failure limit us as individuals rather than drive us is a great way to fail. It's just as true in organizations. To encourage an organizational growth mindset, UK consulting company NixonMcInnes incorporated a practice called the Church of Fail. Every month, the team would gather in the conference room, and people would be invited to stand up and talk about one of their failures. An article in *Inc.* explains that “employees must describe how they dealt with the situation and say what they will do differently next time.”²⁷¹ At the end, everybody in the room would wildly applaud the person.

How do you respond to losses? Do you let them defeat you, or do you use them as motivators, as signs that you have more to learn and new opportunities to improve? If we let fear of failure become a belief that we *will* fail, we won't grow. Worse, we'll never be able to let go of that fear. And then how will we become fearless when it's time to perform?

Unlocking Your Fearlessness

I admire my three-year-old daughter's fearlessness—and I also tense up as she climbs on our sofa, runs down our stairs, and flies into my arms with no concern for the potential dangers. Kids have a jungle-gym fearlessness that we often lose as adults. Parents have to teach their kids a healthy dose of fear to make sure they look both ways before they cross the street or always wear a

helmet when they skateboard. Adult lives are often consumed by fear, but kids . . . They are amazing examples of fearlessness.

I did my grad school thesis on home court advantage in the NBA, and had the good fortune of interviewing players to find out why this phenomenon exists at almost every level (and in every sport). Many of the athletes talked about how they were more comfortable at home, or how the fans gave them energy, or how the refs favored the home team. And while all those explanations may be true, the most interesting finding was that the home team tended to play with more aggressiveness—more fearlessness—than the road team.

What's more, the coaches tended to use language to prime that fearlessness more so at home than away. On the road, they said, "Let's steal a game. Slow the pace down. Take care of the ball so their crowd doesn't get into it." The away team often operated from a fear-of-failure game plan. At home, on the contrary, the messaging was, "Let's go and take it. Be aggressive. Fly around. Be fearless." Interestingly, one of the players I interviewed actually played better on the road. Why? He felt there was no pressure, and he didn't have to worry about playing up to the expectations of the crowd, his family, or his friends. For him, the road was a place where he could more easily shed his fear of failure. The greatest takeaway here is that performers can cultivate a fearless approach no matter what their environment is, if they think intentionally.

When we are performing, the focus should be on how we can be successful, not on why we won't be. It's a fearless optimism. When we are fearless, we are unconcerned about judgment. Elite performers know how to decouple the personal pain that failure could bring and shelve the fear of it during the performance. Instead, they tap into a perspective that there is nothing to lose. This frees them to take risks, play aggressively, and bring their all to the performance—without worrying that their all won't be enough.

On the way to becoming one of the greatest athletes of all time, Serena Williams has leveraged her hatred of losing and failure, and has intentionally focused on fearlessness. In preparing to play against Angelique Kerber in the 2016 Wimbledon Final, after losing to her at the Australian Open, Williams reflected on their earlier match: "I felt like I could have played better. I felt like she played great. She came out swinging, ready to win. She was fearless. That's something I learned. When I go into a final, I, too, need to be fearless

like she was.”²⁷² Williams’s ability to prepare in fear and then perform with fearlessness led her to win that 2016 Wimbledon Final, which tied her with Steffi Graf’s record of twenty-three Grand Slam championships.

A study in the journal *Personality Disorders* found that psychopaths share a similar trait with professionals who respond to emergency situations, such as ambulance workers and firefighters: a low level of fear.²⁷³ I’m not saying we need to be psychotic in order to perform well, but we do have the ability to be exceptionally fearless when the situation demands. These individuals “are heroic not necessarily because they are constitutionally fearless, but because they can learn to turn their fear off,” said Scott Lilienfeld, the professor who conducted the research, in a *New York Times* article. “There is a narrow gradient around things we are afraid of. Fears are very compartmentalized.”²⁷⁴ Like an emergency responder, the elite performer has learned how to turn fear off in performance.

In shift 5, I mentioned Google’s research on the importance of psychological safety in high-performing teams. Google is not the only organization that encourages its employees to be fearless, though. Before realizing that a constant state of combined fearlessness and speed can have less-than-positive consequences, Facebook encouraged its employees with the motto, “Move fast and break things.”²⁷⁵

Depending on the performance or the performer, fearlessness can show up in many forms. It isn’t always high energy or aggressive. Sometimes it can present as extreme calm. Essentially, fearlessness is clarity. It is an inner belief that you are secure and will be OK—that whatever the outcome, you will manage. Your external focus is clear because your inner being is not cluttered with doubt or overwhelmed by potential negative consequences.

Being fearless is glamorized by many but accomplished by few. It takes work, and it requires you to intentionally set your mind.

Risk-Taking—Appropriately

Golfers call me more than any other type of athlete. As a result, I have worked with hundreds of golfers over the years, ranging from amateurs to pros. Golf, possibly even more than other sports, requires setting the mind for performance. It’s just you, the club, and the ball, and it can be easy to let fear ruin your swing. As Bob Anderson and Bill Adams put it, borrowing in part

from Tim Gallwey's famous book *The Inner Game of Tennis*, "The inner game runs the outer game."²⁷⁶

When I work with golfers, we often talk about the importance of being "smart aggressive"—focusing on conservative targets but taking aggressive swings. Golf is one of the few sports that often rewards conservative play and punishes aggressive play; there are literally hazards on the course. As a result, a golfer's strategy for a round may need to be conservative, yet when it comes time to perform a swing, he or she still has to do so with fearlessness.

The idea of being smart aggressive is a great example of how fearlessness doesn't mean taking inappropriate risk. Fearlessness and stupidity are not the same thing. Fearlessness is about being bold and vulnerable.

In the book *Daring Greatly*, renowned author and research professor Brené Brown—who has studied and written about vulnerability extensively—defines vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure."²⁷⁷ Fearless performers are vulnerable in that they accept the risk and emotional exposure that will come from putting themselves out there, laying everything on the line. No matter how hazardous the environment, they have the courage to execute at the peak of their potential.

From the outside looking in, elite performers seem to take risks that are hard to believe. But in the moment, for the performer who has leveraged a fear of failure in preparation, the risk and fear that others dwell on become more of an afterthought. Even when the approach is conservative in nature because that's the appropriate strategy (as in golf), that approach needs to be backed by a fearless mind.

Letting Go of Safety Nets

For years, I have played basketball every Wednesday, and I love competing with my weekly crew. One night, as I tried to save a ball along the baseline underneath the basket, I came down on my left leg prematurely and felt my leg collapse underneath me. I went to the ground and stayed there. Aside from some broken fingers and toes as a kid, I had never had a serious injury. As I hobbled off the court with help, I knew this time was different.

At the doctor's office the next day, I found out that I had torn my ACL, one of the major ligaments that supports the structure and functioning of the knee. Surgery would be required to repair it. I was afraid I wouldn't ever be

able to play basketball again. Perhaps worse, for the first time in my life, I feared being injured. Now I wondered: if I did play, would it happen again?

In addition to my rehabilitation therapists, I saw just about every type of specialist you could imagine—acupuncturists, massage therapists, chiropractors, and others. It took longer than expected to return to the court, but eventually I did, with a knee brace strapped firmly around my leg. My crew was happy to see me. I ran up and down the court as best I could, being cautious to protect my knee. But about halfway through the game, I realized my brace wasn't giving me much support. I was still worried, but I decided I would be better off without it. I unstrapped it and slid it to the sideline. All of a sudden, I started to play fearlessly free.

Most of us have some type of safety net we fall back on, especially when performing. For a basketball player, it might be avoiding certain kinds of shots. For a speaker, it might be sticking to certain types of audiences or venues or industries. For a leader, it might mean avoiding certain tough decisions, like whether or not to retain somebody who is underperforming. If you want to unlock your performance potential, though, at some point you have to let go of that fear, and let go of the safety nets you might be holding on to as part of that fear.

Whatever your safety nets might be, take the time to consider what you might accomplish if you let them go.

Avoiding the Amygdala Hijack

Perhaps you have heard of the “amygdala hijack,” a term that Daniel Goleman first brought to light in his best-selling book, *Emotional Intelligence*.²⁷⁸ An amygdala hijack occurs when our fear-based emotions override our better decision-making capabilities. It is the primary reason we need to avoid fear in our performances.

In these moments, the amygdala section of your brain receives messages from the environment that kick it into overdrive, generating more fear than you can handle. You can't think clearly. You become overwhelmed and out of touch with the options that exist. Your focus, both physical and mental, is narrowed, and the only thing you can see is what is most obvious.

When the amygdala gets hijacked in performance, it can cause us to freeze or break down. An amygdala hijack leads to a narrowed perspective—typically,

just our own—and keeps us from seeing alternative options. Emotion overrides logic. Perhaps you have seen this with a boss who is stressed and unable to communicate all sides of an idea to her team, or a politician who does not remain poised during a debate, or a spouse who believes he is 100 percent right in his way of parenting. When we are in this state, we become sure that we are right, even when reality says otherwise.

The hijack can happen to all of us—maybe you don't feel appreciated by your boss, or you're not feeling heard, or you were blamed for something unfairly. It's usually a defensive response, when we feel threatened, which is why it's so important to build self-awareness. That way, you can assess the reality of the "threat" and manage yourself when your brain is hijacked.

Developing tools and processes to limit the fear response is also essential for performance. Goleman, like many other psychologists, suggests mindfulness as a way to cope with or prevent the hijack. (I'm a big fan of mindfulness training, as I explained in the previous shift.) Research has shown that 85 percent of worries lead to a positive or neutral outcome and that 80 percent of us say we handled a bad outcome better than we expected.²⁷⁹ Remind yourself of this before a performance, to help calm your mind. By preparing for an amygdala hijack, you will be better ready to manage one if it's activated in performance.

Using the fear of failure to prepare for this possibility does more than just help you create systems and processes to limit its potential, however. It's also the best way to avoid a hijack altogether.

Daredevils: How Fear Prepares Us to Be Fearless

For Nik Wallenda and Alex Honnold, every step they take could be deadly. Wallenda is a tightrope walker. You may have watched him walk across the Grand Canyon, between skyscrapers in Chicago and New York City, or over Niagara Falls. He even walked blindfolded between two skyscrapers while his father gave him directions from afar. Wallenda knows intimately how dangerous his work is; his great-grandfather died falling off a tightrope while performing a stunt in Puerto Rico.²⁸⁰

When asked how he is able to fearlessly perform, Wallenda points to the importance of preparation. He notes that while he doesn't have a net, he has

trained to hold on to the wire if something goes awry. He also prepares for the worst possible conditions. While training for his walk across the Grand Canyon, he prepared with 120 mph winds even though the winds probably wouldn't get higher than 70 mph.²⁸¹ Wallenda has been walking on wires since he was two years old, but he never becomes complacent with his preparation.

When it comes to the day of a walk, he is quick to point out something else: what others see as fear, he sees as respect. Wallenda knows the danger involved, but he also knows that he has done the training needed to step on the wire. When Wallenda was walking across the Grand Canyon without a net, he hit 48 mph wind gusts and found himself taking a knee so he could get close to the rope and handle the conditions.²⁸² Wallenda doesn't walk stupid. He's smart aggressive. He filters his mind and counters his thoughts by focusing on fearlessly moving forward one step at a time. Without his intensive training, he would not legitimately be able to tell himself that he's OK. Without a fear of failure in preparation, he could not be fearless in performance. He needs both.

Just like Wallenda, Alex Honnold loves to be moving at extreme heights without a safety net. Honnold's documentary, *Free Solo*, about his freestyle climb of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park—something nobody had ever done before—won an Oscar for best documentary, making him the most recognizable climber in the world. The documentary and his TED Talk are a master class in the preparation and performance minds needed to be elite. "You will always feel fear," thirty-three-year-old Honnold once wrote in a note to his eighteen-year-old self. "But over time you will realize that the only way to truly manage your fears is to broaden your comfort zone."²⁸³

In order to become a warrior, Honnold trains his mind and body. In *Free Solo*, he is seen journaling every nuance of the climb. At one point during training, he asks his girlfriend to leave so he can train the way he needs to, without distraction. In an early attempt at the climb, he turns back, saying, "It doesn't feel right." He recognizes that he isn't in a space of fearlessness in that moment, and he needs to continue preparing so he can reach a point of trusting himself to take the next step.

But in his TED Talk, Honnold says that his final successful climb "was the culmination of a nearly decade-long dream, and in the video I'm over twenty-five hundred feet off the ground. Seems scary? Yeah, it is, which is why I spent so many years dreaming about soloing El Cap and not actually

doing it. But on the day that that video was taken, it didn't feel scary at all."²⁸⁴

Honnold's life centers on climbing. He's obsessed—constantly pushing his limits, embracing and leveraging his fear. He climbed El Cap more than fifty times with a rope; he rehearsed the moves over and over again by himself. He needed to respect the mountain and have a healthy understanding of the consequences of falling. As he scaled the wall, he would fill a backpack with any loose rocks he found, to ensure that none of those rocks would get in his way during the free climb. Imagine the discomfort of climbing down one of the most intimidating rock faces on the planet with a backpack full of rocks. Honnold didn't mind. He knew it was getting him closer to climbing fearlessly.

On the day of his ascent, as Honnold passes the toughest section of the climb—the part that has been highlighted throughout the documentary—he looks directly into the camera and smiles. His fear was back at the bottom of the mountain, nowhere in sight.

The climb took Honnold three hours and fifty-six minutes, and he says he was comfortable and fearless throughout.²⁸⁵ On that day, he didn't just become a master of the mountain; he became a master of his performance mind.

Both Honnold and Wallenda seem to be at peace with the possibility that one small step could lead to their demise. They recognize that death is an inevitable ending to life, but they also do whatever it takes in preparation to ensure that their final fate is not met during their next walk or climb. And although they might be working on performances very different from yours, and preparing with rare discipline and focus, the necessary actions are not all that different.

Being fearless can be a challenge, but we are more capable of managing fear than we give ourselves credit for. According to Dr. Kerry Ressler, director of the Neurobiology Fear Laboratory, about 90 percent of us are resilient after something tragic happens, like a car accident or a death in the family.²⁸⁶ We are able to put the experience into perspective and rebound from it, not letting it turn into an obsessive fear. Fear-inducing experiences cause post-traumatic stress disorder, panic disorders, and other mental health issues in only 10 percent of people. For many of us, when we face our worst fear and come out whole on the other side—whether it's a major life fear or a fear associated with a specific event or performance—we realize that we can handle bad outcomes in the future. It builds our fearlessness. It's what's behind Michael

Jordan's famous Nike ad: "I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."²⁸⁷

Exercise Section

Leveraging Your Fear to Become Fearless

Fear is not your enemy, but being fearful of fear can be. Learn how to use fear—how to unleash it so you can be fearless when performing. Fear will help you stay sharp and fight complacency, while fearlessness opens up possibilities and frees you to take appropriate risks. We can learn to notice fear without empowering it, and instead we can empower our inner bold and brave self, without concern for potential loss. Fearlessness—true fearlessness—shows itself only when you have spent the time fearing failure in preparation. It shows when you have looked under all the cracks and crevasses of fear and sat with it. From there you can tap into the freedom to be fearless.

What will be your relationship with fear going forward? Let's take a look at how to cultivate your fear of failure in preparation and your fearlessness in performance.

Worst-Case Scenario

Thinking about the worst-case scenario allows us to leverage our fear of failure and create an action plan that then allows us to perform fearlessly. Here is a chart you can use to map your worst-case scenarios and get to work to ensure they do not come to fruition.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO	WHAT CAN I DO TO MINIMIZE THE LIKELIHOOD?

Recovery Time

Going back to your worst-case scenario list, consider what it would take—in terms of time, resources, energy—to recover from a bad outcome. If you think about it, would it really take as much effort as you fear? As you get ready to perform, remind yourself that getting over a bad outcome is manageable. Use that perspective in performance so you can function without a fear of failure.

Flip Failure

Take an index card. On one side, write down all of your major successes; on the other side, write down your primary missteps, mistakes, or failures. Whenever you find yourself in need of motivation during preparation, look at the failure side to remind yourself what you're trying to avoid repeating. Whenever you need to tap into your fearlessness, especially just before a performance, look at the success side to remind yourself that you are capable of great things.

Pet the Snake

Is some big fear holding you back? Want to know how to overcome that fear? Simply pet the snake. What do I mean by that? Well, if you are afraid of snakes, the best way to overcome that fear is to pet one. Research has shown

again and again that exposing ourselves to our fears is the best way to overcome them. Exposure therapy has long been used to help people with phobias, panic disorders, post-traumatic stress, and many other anxieties.²⁸⁸ If you experience any of these, I highly recommend you see a trained professional to help with your fear. But if you don't believe you have a clinical disorder, exposing yourself to your fear may be a great way to overcome it and tap into your fearless performance mind.

Here's an example: A friend of a friend was terrified of failing in his new business venture. He thought about the extreme worst-case scenario: becoming broke and homeless. To expose himself to that fear, he panhandled for a day on a corner near his neighborhood. It freed him up by tamping down his fear—and he earned forty dollars to donate to the local homeless shelter.

How could you use exposure therapy to reduce a fear that may be holding you back in your performance?

Remove a Sense

When working with performers, I train them to learn to be fearless at their craft. One of the techniques I use is to take away one of their five senses. I have golfers hit shots on the driving range or the course with their eyes closed. I ask basketball players to shoot free throws or three-point shots with their eyes closed, too. With one of their senses removed, performers learn to be more fearless in their approach because they're less worried about the outcome. After all, the chances of making the shot or getting on the green aren't high. But at the same time, they also realize they are more competent than they thought—because sometimes they nail it.

Pick a sense that you often use in performance, and take it away. Learn to be comfortable without that sense so that your other senses are heightened, and practice letting go of the outcome so that you become more fearless in performance.

Road Advantage

As I mentioned earlier, NBA players have a home court advantage partially because they are primed—by their coaches and their environments—to play

more fearlessly at home than on the road. In your case, even if your performances do not involve travel, perhaps there are aspects of your environment or the people around you that prime you to be cautious or hold back.

How can you turn a “home court advantage” into a “road advantage”? In other words, what can you change in the run-up to a performance to remove messages of caution or to create an environment that helps you feel more fearless? Create a list of action items that will set your mind for a fearless performance.

Burn the Boats

The ancient Greeks were famous for burning their own boats when they traveled across the sea to fight. Burning the boats allowed them to tap into their fearlessness because it eliminated the option of retreat. What safety net are you carrying that might be making you more cautious than you should be? Take the time to really assess what you’re holding on to out of fear. What can you do to “burn the boats”—lay everything on the line and commit to putting your all into your performance?



Preparation is the time to listen to your fears, pay attention to what you can learn from them, and let them motivate you to work harder. When it’s time to perform, though, you have to let go of the possibility of losing or your fear of the worst-case scenario. It’s all a matter of focus. What will you do to tap into fear of failure in preparation and fearlessness in performance? Commit today to preparing with fear in mind so you can let go of it in your next performance.

Parenting is the hardest job I've ever had—there isn't even a close second. I went from focusing on what *I* wanted to do every single day to living at the mercy of naps, feedings, bedtime stories, and middle-of-the-night wakeup calls. Especially in the infancy stages, parenting can feel like a one-way street—but that sense of pure responsibility never ends. Recently, as part of a discussion group that met with a US congressman, I was asked to share what we cared about most as it pertains to politics. My answer was simple: “I care about my children's future.”

My job as a parent is to give. Be selfless. Serve. In those first months and years, I burned the candle at both ends and gave everything I had, until my wife looked at me one evening and asked, “Are you OK?”

“I feel tired,” I replied. “I feel as though I have stopped doing stuff for myself.”

One of the best pieces of advice I ever received was from a CEO client who said, “Focus on your marriage first and your kids second.” Her point was that if you don't put the marriage first, the marriage will break down, which will end up hurting your kids in the long run. It reminds me of the old leadership adage that sends the same message by referencing the airplane safety brochure: *When the plane is going down, make sure to put your own oxygen mask on first, before assisting others.*

We can't help others if we're incapacitated. Parenting and leadership are alike in that we are expected to focus on serving those we care about, those for whom we are responsible. We even use a phrase to define it: *servant leadership*. Yet when we don't take time to put on our own “oxygen mask,” we end up running on an empty, nonfunctioning tank, which is a recipe for disaster. As leaders—and we all play a leadership role in some parts of our lives—being selfless all the time means we eventually lose sight of the deep, internal work that is necessary to serve. When we don't focus on our own health, well-being, personal growth, and individual goals, we limit our capacity to lead.

My wife and I agreed: as a parent, I had to fill my cup first and then provide the overflow to our children. We devised a plan to help me become more selfish. Once I reversed the order of *selfish* and *selfless*, I became much more capable—more able to meet my children’s needs *and* to feel happy and fulfilled with my role.

Performers are no different.

So much of high performance is about the subjective ability to connect with others—not the obvious objective, but the intangibles. That connection with a crowd (for a musician or a speaker), a teammate (for an athlete), a customer (for a salesperson), or a team (for a business leader) comes from a place of other-focus—what others need from you in the moment. Winning requires connection. And yet it can be difficult to put ourselves in that state of mind if we haven’t focused on our own needs, desires, goals, and ambitions during preparation.

Selfishness has gotten a bad rap, but we need to prepare with *selfishness* so we can perform with *selflessness*. We need to take care of ourselves first so we can serve others by connecting with their needs and fulfilling those needs. We need to lead by example before we challenge those on our team. Selfish preparation is a strength, not a weakness. Being concerned with our own interests, beliefs, and welfare in preparation is what allows us to let go of our concern for ourselves when performing. It increases our capacity to give.

You have probably heard a manager, coach, leader, or performance expert emphasize the importance of selflessness. They are right. When we are performing, we are part of a larger whole, and the whole must be greater than the sum of its parts. As an African proverb wisely points out, “If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”²⁸⁹ Humans are wired to be connected. We are social beings who have leveraged connection over history to ensure we would survive. When a team is able to connect and unlock potential through selfless performance, true greatness happens.

As you think about the two points on this shift—selfish and selfless—perhaps the cleanest way to do so is to focus on the *self* and the *other*. Great performers are *self*-focused when they are preparing and *other*-focused when they are performing. The key is understanding when to focus on each and why.

Being Selfish Is a Good Thing—Sometimes

Lisa Nichols is a bundle of energy. You may have seen her inspirational videos on YouTube, listened to her on a podcast, or read one of her seven books. She has appeared on *Oprah*, *The Today Show*, *The Steve Harvey Show*, and others. Her smile could light up a room, and her voice could power a city. She has become a thought leader, and her company, Motivating the Masses, Inc., is one of the country's only publicly traded personal and business development companies. By all accounts, Nichols is a mission-minded servant leader. Her nonprofit has helped prevent teen suicides and supported thousands of dropouts in their efforts to go back to school. Her selflessness has earned her humanitarian awards, and the city of Houston even named a day (May 9) after her to recognize her impact on the community.²⁹⁰

Nichols has said that all of her success comes back to one decision that changed the course of her life: she chose to be selfish.

Nichols's son was growing up without a father—he went to jail when her son was eight months old. As a single mother, Nichols was struggling. She was on government assistance and had only \$11.42 in the bank. Her son needed diapers, and all she could do was wrap him in towels. The next day, she turned to her son and said, “Don’t worry, baby. Mommy will never be this broke or broken again.”²⁹¹ It was her watershed moment. But her shift was completely inward. She still had to get rid of people in her life who were holding her back. “You gotta rescue you first,” she said in an interview on Tom Bilyeu’s show *Impact Theory*. “I am much more valuable to my family and to my community because I was willing to let them go, go through the door myself, teach myself, learn myself, condition myself, and then come back and get them.”²⁹² Nichols was preparing for the next stage in her life.

Nichols focused on her own goals, her own needs, her own ambitions. She became educated, powerful, and strong. She held herself accountable and took ownership. She used selfishness in her preparation so she could make a life in which she could perform with selflessness.

Nichols’s story is a bit different from others I’ve told, because the preparation and performance were separated by years, not months, weeks, or hours. And yet the lessons still apply. Nichols took personal responsibility for her progress, and for meeting her needs and those of her son. She made sacrifices to fulfill her responsibility to herself to grow and succeed. That is

what being selfish in preparation requires, and that's why it's necessary.

As a society, we glorify accountability and ownership, and we demonize selfishness. But I believe the two are intertwined. People who hold themselves accountable will not let their preparation slip; they won't make excuses. They are empowered to grow their value so they can add value to others' lives. People who take ownership are taking responsibility for their goals, their actions, and their decisions.

Ownership is about building equity—value that owners develop by investing in themselves. In his research, psychologist and economist Daniel Kahneman references the Endowment Effect, which suggests that people ascribe more value to those things they own.²⁹³ That's why, for instance, you may leave a hotel room messier than you would ever leave your house. When we feel ownership, we care more—and caring about our own growth and progress is an essential ingredient in great preparation. The best performers in the world are accountable and take ownership, and the best teams embed these ideals into their culture. Being selfish in preparation—focused on our own goals, our own behaviors, our own needs, our own growth—is how we take ownership and hold ourselves accountable.

Selfish preparation is all about putting your goals and personal needs front and center so you are in the ideal position to succeed when it's time to perform. It's intentional action for your own good. It's an understanding that we are best able to help others when we are mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually strong—that, as with a four-legged chair, each prong helps create stability and deserves attention. Selfish preparation is the salesperson who prioritizes hitting her own goals for the month or quarter over helping colleagues do the same. It is the musician who tells the venue exactly what he needs to relax before putting on a great show. It is the couple who make time for a date night every week, no matter what. It's the college basketball player who goes to the gym to get shots up rather than taking shots at the bar with friends.

When you are selfish, you are serving yourself because you are driven and ambitious about the future; you know that in order to get to where you want to go, you need the best version of you. Without tapping into your desires, wants, and needs, you will simply comply with what others want from you or expect for you. So take some time, be selfish, set your intentions, and focus on exactly what you want. Then go to work.

In shift 7 I wrote about the importance of examining your purpose. It's especially crucial for a long-term vision, although I hope your purpose also helps drive your day-to-day motivations. But in the short and medium term, we also need personal goals in all parts of our lives to help motivate us. To connect with the grit and determination required for big achievements, we need to feel we're working toward something important, something we desperately want or even need. During preparation, when we're often alone, those goals have to be personal, and they have to be a priority. While we may have altruistic ambitions, in order to drive us to the highest levels of preparation, we need goals separate from those focused on what others need from us.

When a senior executive named Jack came into my office one day for a coaching meeting, he opened by saying, "I feel dead inside." He was running the day-to-day operations of a company that brought in \$50 million a year in revenue. He had helped his business grow tremendously and had become so valuable that he received equity. Jack managed multiple teams and was consistently trying to help his employees get to where they wanted to go. Yet as the years went on and he continued to serve others, something paramount happened—he forgot to serve himself. Jack never "filled his own bucket" at work and had lost sight of any personal goals. He was exhausted, burnt out. He had lost his inspiration for the work.

We needed to spend time on Jack so he could spend time on his team. We talked about what he wanted, what inspired him. We shifted the focus from the window to the mirror. Jack needed to get clear on what he wanted out of his work. Once we unpacked his wants and developed a plan to prioritize them, he gained tremendous clarity and was able to become an effective servant leader again.

Priorities require sacrifice—and not just in the movies. *Brittany Runs a Marathon* is based on the true story of Brittany O'Neill, a woman who hit a point of rock bottom and turned to running as something she could do to take control. She'd found herself working in an unfulfilling job, overweight, and increasingly unhappy, out most nights boozing it up. Once she started down the path of major change, the sense of accomplishment she felt encouraged her to keep running. It became a priority in her life; it changed her and made her stronger—physically, mentally, and emotionally. O'Neill's first major

accomplishment, according to a profile in *Runner's World*, was running the 6.1-mile Central Park loop. "There were no cheering crowds and no ribbon there at the finish, but the feeling I had was special," she explains. "For lack of a better phrase, it felt like I wasn't a loser."²⁹⁴

When she finally got serious about running the New York City Marathon, O'Neill's dedication had to rise with the size of the goal. "I was so focused," she continues. "That period took a lot of understanding from my husband and my friends."²⁹⁵ In the movie (where her story is dramatized, of course), a relationship with somebody who wasn't a great friend—who wasn't supportive of O'Neill's goals or her growth—falls necessarily by the wayside. But just as the movie title reveals, O'Neill achieves her goal in the end. More important, the goal itself changed her; it taught her to value herself and her abilities, and to prioritize her own well-being.

Balance in life just isn't feasible. Something is always pulling our attention and energy in one direction or another. But if we set personal goals and priorities—and then focus on those priorities while giving work and aspects of our personal life the attention they deserve, when they deserve it—we can create fulfillment. Exercise, diet, sleep, time with friends, time spent on hobbies—all can be seen as selfish activities if viewed through a certain lens, yet each can improve our professional and personal lives. Taking action on our own personal priorities can fuel our performance, especially when our goals are integrated and have an impact on how we show up.

Answer this question: what goal tends to get lost as you get busy? For most of my clients, as they become busier and more successful, the selfish actions are the ones that often get neglected. That is, until they realize that those selfish actions will actually help them prepare for performance.

For example, a recent study of professional soccer players found that when they learned about and prepared for vocations outside of soccer, they actually had better and longer soccer careers.²⁹⁶ Lead researcher David Lavallee says, "This is where the performance gains will be seen within sport in the next twenty years. It will be in the well-being and in the welfare area." Focusing on one thing and becoming an expert may help you perform in the short term, but in the long term, selfishly investing in your future happiness and security in developing yourself seems to be the way to go.

I have asked leaders of nonprofits, CEOs of tech companies, and head coaches of professional sports teams why they believe in coaching for their

employees but don't have a coach to help them navigate the complexities of leadership. They usually don't have a quality response other than "lack of time." But a great leader, just like a great performer, will prioritize time to work on themselves.

Once you become aware of your needs, your strengths, and your limits, you can leverage them in preparation. With clarity, you can grow and improve more—and faster. When you don't recognize these parts of your inner self—and instead you are outward facing all the time—your tank will eventually become empty, and your connection with your inner life will be lost.

Perhaps you know these people who are running on empty: the mom who lives for her children and never gives herself the space to grow. The head football coach who sleeps in the office and neglects his personal health, until he faints from stress and sleep deprivation on the sideline. The leader who refuses to get help because he doesn't want to burden those around him. But people who only think selflessly neglect their own needs and, in turn, end up having to neglect those whom they intend to serve. Ultimately, it's up to you to look in the mirror first so you can then look out the window and serve those around you.

If we leverage selfishness in preparation—the time when nobody is watching—we put ourselves in a better position to give selflessly when the time comes.

Give to Perform Better

Anthony Davis was a freshman at University of Kentucky, playing in the NCAA Tournament and destined to be the first pick in the NBA draft a few months later. On the biggest stage of his career—a national championship game—he secured sixteen rebounds, five assists, three steals, and six blocks. But he struggled on offense, scoring just six points and going one for ten from the field. Yet when it came time to grant the Final Four Most Outstanding Player award, Davis got it. He won that award because he was selfless in performance. He won because he helped his team win.

After the game, Davis explained, "I always had a smile [on] my face. I came in the huddle. . . . I told them I was rebounding, blocking shots and defending. That was my job for the day."²⁹⁷ Davis knew what his team needed,

and he focused on being of service to them rather than in service to himself. Superstars know how to help their team even when they are struggling, and Davis was able to do just that. He had already proved to be an elite talent, but during the national championship game he proved to be a true superstar.

The best performers share, and the best leaders and coaches encourage it in their teams. High school basketball Coach Glenn Farello and his team, mentioned in shift 4, use a slogan I love: “Share the game.” In order to get to where they want to go, teammates have to focus on each other rather than on their individual goals or ambitions. This is the opposite of what is called “hero ball” in the NBA—a lack of team focus by individual players or even entire teams. Hero ball stems from the notion that superstar basketball players need to have the ball in their hands and score the last shot. They are essentially heroes for their team, but being a hero requires isolation and being more focused on one’s own abilities and talents than on playing a supporting role within the team framework.

For years, NBA teams craved players who could break down other players one-on-one and get a bucket at crunch time, but that idea has shifted. Henry Abbott, one of the smartest basketball writers I know, wrote a piece for ESPN in which he noted how much hero ball can hurt performance: “The goal of basketball, in its simplest form, is to turn possessions into points. And on that basis, when [a sports technology company] began breaking down NBA plays by type in 2004, what it found would have made [influential college basketball coach John] Wooden smile.” According to the data, the most efficient plays are those that involve multiple players, such as transition plays, where players are quickly moving up the floor together, and putbacks, or immediately scoring after a missed shot by a teammate. These plays earn, on average, more than one point per possession. So what about isolation plays? They are the least efficient, “good for only 0.78 points per possession,” writes Abbott.²⁹⁸

What’s worse, Abbott points out, is that isolation plays are run about 12 percent of the time during the course of a game, but are run 19 percent of the time when the game has five minutes or less left.²⁹⁹ Many players become less focused on others and more insular when the game is on the line—and their performance suffers as a result. A great team knows the power of sharing whenever you’re on the court.

Adam Grant, in his terrific book *Give and Take*, shares research showing that selfless people (givers) outperform selfish people (takers) in moments of

other-focused performance. For instance, givers average 50 percent more sales than takers.³⁰⁰ Givers are generous with their time, their attention, their energy, their talents, and even the limelight.

When Herbie Hancock had the opportunity to perform with Miles Davis in Germany in the 1960s, he experienced that kind of generosity firsthand. Even though Hancock was a prolific musician, he still looked up to Miles, which made him a bit nervous when they were playing Davis's composition, "So What." They were having a ton of fun onstage, and the music was flowing. Davis got into one of his solos, and then Hancock played the wrong chord. Hancock couldn't believe the mistake he had made; he grabbed his hands and put them over his ears in embarrassment.

At that moment, Hancock says,

Miles paused for a second, and then he played some notes, that made my chord right, which astounded me. . . . Miles didn't hear it as a mistake. He heard it as something that happened. An event. And so that was part of the reality of what was happening at that moment, and he dealt with it.³⁰¹

Davis generously found something in that moment that would fit with the band and work for the audience. It would have been easy for Davis to be a prima donna, but instead he chose to selflessly roll with the situation—he had Hancock's back and was able to contribute to something unique and bigger than himself.

Humans are wired to be generous, to help others, to be social beings. It feels good and gives us a sense of belonging. Research has found that "loneliness has the same impact on mortality as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day, making it even more dangerous than obesity."³⁰² As Sandra Day O'Connor said, "We don't accomplish anything in this world alone." Even though we are designed to serve others, we all know that at times, we aren't as other-focused as we could be. Yet altruism is a choice that can be trained, a Stanford study found.³⁰³ Working on relationships and increasing our interactions with people help us act more selflessly.

As the research professor and author Brené Brown points out, "People are hard to hate close up."³⁰⁴ It's through intentional interactions that we start to truly see others. And by seeing them, we open ourselves up to be in service to

them.

Being selfless in performance brings so many benefits back to us.

Focusing on Others Can Increase Your Grit

When Chris Cassidy showed up for day one of BUD/S training, he saw a diverse group of people ready to test themselves against some of the most grueling physical challenges imaginable. Cassidy and many other SEALs have told me that BUD/S is not so much a training ground to prepare soldiers for war, but rather a weeding-out process to see who is mentally tough enough to become an elite soldier. For the first four weeks, Cassidy was focused on himself—what he needed to do to ensure he would make it. In week five, though, his class leader became sick, and Cassidy was immediately thrown into a leadership position—right in the middle of Hell Week, the toughest part of the entire training. At that moment, he learned the power of other-focus.

“My own personal aches and pains—‘oh, my heel is killing me’—just kind of went away,” Chris told me on my podcast:

It’s interesting how your brain can kind of shift from focusing on you and this feeling sorry for yourself. . . . I got all those guys to worry about now, and all that equipment and all those evil group of mean instructors over there are going to be yelling at me if the whole class is not performing. It instantly focused the shift away from myself to the group.³⁰⁵

Cassidy had prepared selfishly to get to this moment, competing for a spot in the training, competing against his fellow trainees in skills tests. But once he was in a leadership position, he was ready to serve selflessly.

Of the 120 people Cassidy started BUD/S with, only seventeen graduated with him.³⁰⁶ Would Cassidy have made it if he hadn’t been placed in a leadership position? Probably, given the illustrious career he has had since then. But it’s possible that stepping into a selfless role made all the difference in his success.

When have you found yourself giving more than you thought possible in the service of others? If you’re a parent, it probably happens all the time, and

the payoff is obvious. But maybe you haven't paid enough attention to your role as a team leader or member of a team—and how your grit and determination have likely been enhanced by your commitment to others.

Selflessness Requires Connecting with Something Beyond Ourselves

When we say, “Thank you for your service,” we are appreciating the selflessness of members of the military. Many service members will tell you that they are uneasy about this phrase. Often, they enlisted for selfish reasons—for an education, future career opportunities, even a way to escape a tough situation at home. Still, most come to learn that performing in the military is more about selflessly being there for others—others in uniform, others at home.

Chris Cassidy certainly learned that lesson as a member of the SEALs, serving as a captain and receiving many awards and medals, most notably a Bronze Star for his combat leadership. While Cassidy was serving, he decided he also wanted to be an astronaut. As you can probably guess, he excelled in that endeavor too and in 2009 became the 500th astronaut to make it to space and only the second Navy SEAL to do so. If you watched the May 2020 Space X launch with astronauts Robert Behnken and Douglas Hurley, you may have heard about Cassidy, who was up in space waiting for his fellow Americans to arrive.

As an astronaut, Cassidy most likely experienced something called the overview effect—a term coined by author Frank White to describe the profound reaction astronauts have when viewing Earth from space, the mental shift that creates a better perspective of their role on Earth as a member of the global community. White's book *The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution* argues that space exploration by the public will lead to a greater appreciation for the communal problems that we have on Earth.³⁰⁷ Edgar Mitchell, an astronaut on *Apollo 14*, famously said, “Something happens to you out there . . . You develop an instant global consciousness, a people orientation, an intense dissatisfaction with the state of the world and a compulsion to do something about it.”³⁰⁸ When they come back down, many of those astronauts have a sense of the magnitude of Earth, and as a result, they feel a duty to selflessly make it better. The overview effect is a great example of how connecting with something larger than ourselves can increase

our selflessness, and how the change in our performance has the potential to change the world.

There's a famous story about John F. Kennedy visiting NASA and asking an employee what he did there. The man, who was a janitor, replied, "Mr. President, I'm helping put a man on the moon." That janitor put his ego aside and performed with a selfless focus on the grander vision and mission. Feeling a part of something greater than oneself doesn't have to be just for people like astronauts or pro athletes. It's about everyday people, too.

How can you get to a point where you connect with something bigger than yourself when performing? What do you need to do in order to be in service to those around you? Selfless performance is a choice. It's up to you to value it, train for it, and make it part of your everyday vocabulary.

Exercise Section

Training for Selfishness and Selflessness

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Detroit Pistons were one of the best and baddest teams in the NBA, winning back-to-back championships in 1989 and 1990, and embracing the nickname "Motor City Bad Boys." The Bad Boys were known for their physical play and no-nonsense approach to basketball. From the outside looking in, they appeared to be a callous group of professionals who used intimidation to get where they wanted to go. Yet if you looked closer, what you would have seen is a team that was committed to selfless performance by leveraging ownership and accountability in preparation.

Joe Dumars, now a Hall of Famer, was a member of that team. After retiring, Dumars ran the Pistons as the general manager and was the architect of one of the few NBA teams to win a championship without a superstar. Cody Royle, on his podcast *Where Others Won't*, interviewed Dumars on what made the Bad Boys successful. Here's an example: Before a game, each player and coach would have to declare two things they would do to help the team that night.³⁰⁹ Each gave their word, and the declaration led to accountability. If, for some reason, the player or coach didn't do the job he owned, they would all hear about it. Perhaps that's why the Pistons were a cohesive, albeit physical, unit. They focused on personal accountability in preparation so they

could have each other's backs on the court.

Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, also wrote a lesser-known book—*Social Intelligence*—that extols the virtues of focusing on others: “When we focus on others, our world expands. Our own problems drift to the periphery of the mind and so seem smaller, and we increase our capacity for connection—or compassionate action.”³¹⁰ I agree with everything he says about the benefits of being focused on others. But what about when we are in preparation mode? That’s when we want our own problems to loom large. We want to be focused on solving our problems, on meeting our needs, on doing what is necessary to attain our goals.

As I said earlier, we often view selflessness as a positive trait and selfishness as a negative, but when we apply those character traits makes all the difference. The following exercises can help you build both minds and learn to shift between them when you need to.

What Advice Would You Give?

Often, it’s easier for us to look outward to help others than it is to look inward to help ourselves. Think about the last time you had a friend who was in need of advice. How easy was it for you to help that friend see the possibilities if only he or she took the time to focus inward? Did you find it unusual to ask your friend to focus on his or her own needs and goals? In contrast, how hard or unusual is it for you to give yourself similar advice when you are struggling?

One of my favorite questions to pose to clients at a time of conflict is: what advice would you give to your best friend if he or she were in the same situation as you? This usually changes my client’s perspective. Sometimes by focusing on somebody else, we discover that what we need becomes clearer. The next time you find yourself struggling, feeling burnt out or uninspired or stuck, ask yourself this question and see where it takes you.

24-Hour Clock

Take an inventory of your day. How much time do you spend selfishly preparing—tending to tasks that you must do in order to perform at your best?

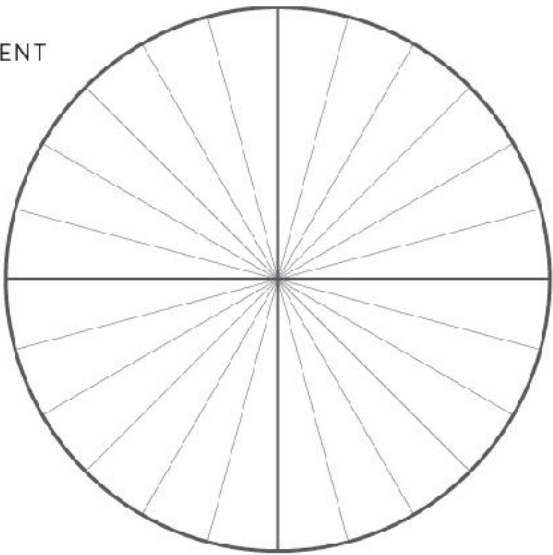
Splice a circle into common activities that you do throughout your day.

Label the activities *SELFISH* and *SELFLESS*. Take note of which areas might be over- and under-indexed. Time management should not be a reactive process. Take ownership over how you are using your time, and make sure you are leaving space to selfishly prepare, whatever that means in your work and personal lives.

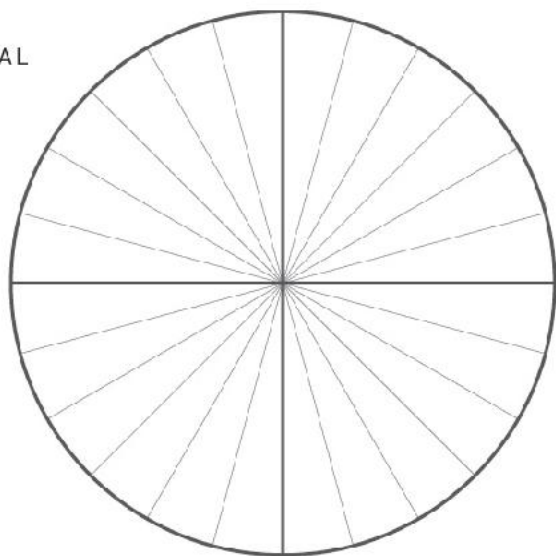
What does your typical 24-hour day look like now?

What would your ideal 24-hour day look like?

CURRENT



IDEAL



Rocks, Pebbles, Sand

There's an old anecdote that highlights the importance of prioritizing. Imagine you have a glass container, and you need to fit rocks, pebbles, and sand into it. In order to fit as much material as possible, you need to start with the rocks first, then insert the pebbles, and finish with the sand. In order to maximize your preparation, you need to take the same approach.

Prioritize your most critical goals and needs: the rocks—those things that would limit your performance if they weren't addressed or attended to. Then make as much room as possible for the pebbles—your lesser goals and needs. Finally, fill in where there's room with the sand: the “nice to have” goals and needs. With this prioritization approach, you can maximize the time you have to selfishly prepare.

PERSONAL ROCKS	PERSONAL PEBBLES	PERSONAL SAND

Empathy Argument

When we are able to walk in someone else's shoes, we are more likely to be empathetic and to be of service. To build your empathy muscle, try this exercise: Pick a controversial topic and argue it from both sides, forcing yourself to deeply consider the perspective of people who hold each opinion and why they do. By training your mind to argue for and against something, regardless of your personal beliefs, you will expand your perspective and increase your empathy. This, in turn, will allow you to be more empathetic and to perform better for those you serve.

Ball of String

This exercise is a great method for building team awareness of the service each member offers by selfishly preparing, while also creating ownership of how each team member will serve others. Get your team together. Instruct one team member to hold the end of a ball of string. Then declare something that person will do to selfishly prepare—the statement should start with “I will.”

While holding the end, the person should throw the ball of string to another teammate and declare what he or she will selflessly do for that teammate during performance. The person who receives the ball of string will then do the same: first stating the selfish act of preparation, and then the selfless act in performance. When all team members have declared how they will selfishly prepare and selflessly perform, you will have a network of string that will help team members visualize the interconnectedness of their efforts.

Active Listening

Perhaps the best gift you can give someone is your full, undivided attention—and doing so gives you the gift of a stronger performance through a better connection. Legendary psychologists Carl Rogers and Richard Farson first coined the term *active listening* in 1957 and published a paper on it in 1987.³¹¹ The tool has been useful for therapists and people in the behavioral development space.

If you want to be a selfless performer, consider where you are on the three levels of listening, which I've adapted here from the book *Co-Active Coaching* by Karen Kimsey-House and Henry Kimsey-House.³¹²

- **Level 1:** Internal Listening—Listening for how the message impacts you.
- **Level 2:** Focused Listening—Listening to what the speaker is saying.
- **Level 3:** Global Listening/Active Listening—Being attuned to and inquiring for more information or clarification.

You should be at least at level 2 and ideally at level 3, active listening.

Try practicing with a partner: Ask your partner to share an issue that he or she is trying to solve. Simply listen without trying to offer solutions. Ask questions to bring the conversation to a deeper level. Try asking questions that would help your partner get to a better understanding, too. Then switch roles and see how it feels when somebody actively listens to you.

Building a shared effort mentality with a team is always worth the energy and effort. Challenge the members of your team to reach as high as they can—literally. Notice that most people will simply put their arms up in the air, but some will stand up or eventually stand on a chair when nudged. You can nudge them to go higher and higher. Then have them sit back down.

Now, introduce a reward, and tell the team that whoever touches some tall object (such as the ceiling) first, without a prop, will get the reward. You'll notice that most of the time they can't reach the ceiling unless they help each other.

When the exercise is over, talk about the limitations that exist when we are alone versus when we work together; also discuss the power of introducing a reward, and how performance typically involves a reward whereas preparation does not. When rewards are present, how can team members make sure they are working together and serving each other? Also, talk about how they need to practice the selfless performance mind if they want to get better at earning the rewards they desire.



When we focus on ourselves in preparation and on others in performance, we tug on both our physiological and our psychological nature, which allows us the opportunity to fulfill our potential. To be clear, it's the focus on the self that unlocks the ability to focus on the other.

Take care of yourself. Pay attention to your health. Make time for your needs. Prioritize your personal goals. All of it will help you prepare yourself, and that self-work gives you the best opportunity to help others. Inner work on the self will prepare you for anything that may come your way. We work best from the inside out, with a focus on selfish preparation that allows us to perform selflessly for others.

Now that you have learned the importance of the preparation mind and the performance mind, where do you go from here? I hope this book serves as a launching point for you to make the changes necessary to unlock your potential. But as the great Maya Angelou said, “Nothing will work unless you do.”³¹³ So now it’s time to get to work.

Here are eight ways to continue working on applying the shifts:

1. Identify the performer in you. When and where are you performing? Drill down on where the line falls, in your life and work, between preparation and performance. Doing this will help you maximize the right mindset for each.
2. *When* matters. Start looking for alignment with the two minds in your own life. When are you leveraging the right mind, and when are you not? Where are you weak? Where are you strong? Learn from yourself.
3. Explore your own shifts. While I did a lot of work to distill the shifts that I think deliver the greatest impact, explore shifts that might be unique to your work outside of these nine. Figure out what works for you. Get clear on your framework. The world is not a one-size-fits-all program. It’s up to you to create the program that boosts your performance.
4. Observe others. Take in your work environment, watch a sporting event, go to a play, read, or watch interviews with great performers. Pay attention to the preparation and performance minds at work. It’s hard to un-see it.
5. Practice, practice, practice. I continue to grow the preparation and performance minds in my life and work. Use the exercise sections in each shift to work on each mindset. Visit my website strongskills.co/book for printable exercises featured in this book,

mindfulness exercise scripts, even more activities, and support.

6. Stay gritty. Embodying these shifts does not occur overnight. It will take time. Even when it seems like one of the shifts is unobtainable, continue to press on. Be patient and persistent.
7. Challenge and support. The greatest leaders and coaches I have been around know how to challenge and support their people. Seek out help in developing your mind. It may be a podcast, a therapist, a coach, a mentor, a manager, another book, a TED Talk, a friend, or your spouse. Find resources that will challenge you to be better and support you in your journey.
8. Share this book. The more we expose those around us to the framework, the more those people can hold us accountable to it. Encourage those who care deeply about you to read this book, and then discuss what you agree or disagree with. Communication is what breeds culture—the ecosystem we all live in at work and at home.

Writing this book was an exercise in shifting my mind—I had to leverage the shifts. I hope that as you read it, the ideas I've shared made you think. It's up to you to continue to challenge your own status quo and create a framework that supports your efforts to grow and change. Work on being both a novice and an expert. Remember that none of us is a finished product.

My hope for you is that you continue to be a lifelong learner and to perform as well as you possibly can in the game of life. Here's to shifting your mind so you can unlock the possibilities of your potential! I can't wait to see what you are able to accomplish.

Go get it.

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